I Hear America Reading: Using Digital Audio to Teach American Poetry

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A course on 19th-century American poetry sounds like fun to a specialist in the field, such as myself. When my department head allowed me to develop such a course for upper-division majors, I quickly realized that "fun" would not be the first word that many students would think of when they saw my course description. They might be intrigued by Whitman, or by Dickinson (though I found that many of my students had experienced Dickinson fatigue in high school). They might wonder what Poe or Melville or those triple-named Schoolroom Poets were writing about in mysterious forms like sonnets, ballads, and odes. But what's fun about any of that?

It wasn't so much the perceived lack of fun, cool, or what have you, that concerned me. It was that the foreign quality of the poetry—as poetry, and therefore "difficult"—posed a potential barrier to the often visceral pleasure of studying pre-Modernist poetry, of feeling the cadences of meter and rhythm play off each other, of seeing that the remarkable things that those poets had to say were also said in remarkable ways. How was I to get my students to understand that metered verse was powerful because you could read it out loud, memorize it, take it to heart, sing it, do all kinds of things that the silent, sit-with-your-anthology style of New Critical reading that my students often identified with poetry just didn't help you to do? If my students couldn't enjoy these texts, or at least understand why they don't enjoy some of them, I thought my own goal of guiding them to improve their skills as readers and critics was doomed from the start. Much of what I wanted them to understand required them to read aloud (in front of other people!) and memorize, and so my task was to find a way to effectively make this central to the course, and to make it *dulce et utilis*: fun and useful.

While I was beginning to plan the course, I attended a workshop offered by my college's IT staff on working with digital audio and podcasting. In less than an hour and a half, the workshop leader had his students recording and editing using the free application Audacity and uploading onto iTunes U (more on these applications in a moment). I left the workshop not only pleased that I had learned new skills, but also excited that those skills were accessible enough that a brief workshop could enable a user to create, modify, and share audio files. After consulting with the workshop leader and other IT staff, I was able to learn more details about the programs and develop a plan for an assignment that, supported by those IT staff, would help me pursue my goal of bringing students more deeply into the world of 19th-century poetry.

For the final project of the class, I assigned my students an audio anthology project, the core of which consisted of mp3 files of themselves reading three different poems from the period covered in our course, accompanied by a 5-6-page essay in which they explained their choices in selecting poems and interpreting them. The essay component was designed to foreground the fact that reading aloud is a critical act, and to give the students a venue for unpacking the critical acts that they had done. The audio files were each the result of a series of drafts, or takes, if you will. One poem was to be memorized, and one was to be peer reviewed.

Of course, when the students learned on the first day of class that this, rather than a familiar research essay, was awaiting them, they panicked. To allay their fears, I played an mp3 of myself reading a passage from Whitman that I had recorded in one rough take, and spent only a half hour on the entire recording-to-uploading process. My reading wasn't very good, but that helped the students to see that a recording could help you determine what more you could do with a poem—which lines need clearer emphasis, what variations of speed and volume might make the reading more compelling. I also had the students (this was a

seminar of 20) sign up to prepare readings of poems we would study as a class. Through the first half of the semester, each student took a turn reading a poem to start class, and the rest of the group would then respond to the reading. The students quickly established a rapport in this activity, treating each other with kindness while pointing out moments that opened up a poem's meaning or ran against their own readings of a text. In the second half of the semester, each student signed up to perform a memorized poem in front of the class, which would be a trial run for their memorized recording. Again, students were very encouraging of each other, while bringing new insights to the poetry in responding to what they heard in the performances.

In translating this live, in-class work into digital form, the students had to learn how to use new hardware and software, a prospect that also daunted many of them. I arranged a lunch-hour workshop with an IT staff member, who led the class through the basics of obtaining and using Audacity, an application that allows users to record, import, and edit audio files and save them into a choice of several common formats (.wav, .mp3, etc.). They also learned how to login to the course's space on iTunes U and upload files to it. By the end of the hour, almost all the students were able to do everything I had been able to do at the end of my own workshop, and those that were still having trouble were able to consult with IT staff at arranged times to troubleshoot their work.

I responded to drafts, sometimes in writing and sometimes in recorded audio comments, as students uploaded at intervals throughout the semester. In a followup optional workshop, we focused on the creative elements of reading aloud—choosing pace, volume, emphasis, and so on—and the pros and cons of including a soundtrack behind the main reading voice. By this point, about two-thirds through the semester, almost all students seemed comfortable with the technology and with the sound of their own voices as they worked on improving their readings and editing their files. In fact, the students often showed their excitement over

experimenting with reading techniques and soundscapes to convey the meanings they had brought out of their chosen poems.

One particularly powerful discussion about what these projects meant came out of reading Catherine Robson's "Standing on the Burning Deck," an essay on the history of poetry memorization in British schools. My students were fascinated by how widespread memorization was among schoolchildren, and several were horrified at the use of corporal punishment to enforce that work. If we weren't getting beaten to make us memorize and recite, they asked, why *are* we doing this? Grades had supplanted the rod, a la Foucault, of course, but was that really why they cared about their projects? As the discussion continued, it became clear that at least some of the students had begun to think of their audio anthologies as new ways of understanding poetry—ways that were rooted in centuries-old and nearly forgotten practices. The students had initially thought themselves engaging with the newness of their own time, learning new computer applications and uploading poems rather than writing or reading them. The more they did it, however, the more they saw themselves as participating in a tradition, one that they could make new without erasing what had come before. Longfellow, Sigourney, Sarah Helen and Walt Whitman: all of them were still speaking to their readers, because their latest readers were now speaking their words again. Poetry had started to become a form of communication in our class.

The anthologies were, not surprisingly, great fun for me to listen to. Students had created personas, styles, sometimes multiple characters, and settings for their performances that involved choices from cadence to microphone placement. One student, who had earlier in his college years taken a leave of absence to tour as a professional musician, even wrote and recorded a pop song version of Poe's "Eldorado." They had clearly learned how to effectively perform a poem and present it digitally. But what had they learned about poetry? On the last day of class, we looked at a handful of sonnets from a range of writers, spanned across the 19th

century. As we parsed those poems and considered why Americans liked sonnets so much, one student asked the big question: "If you have something to say, why not just say it? Why bother to say it in a sonnet?" A third of the students in class raised their hands instantly, and each had a different answer. What became clear, though, was that having to learn how to make a sonnet *sound* like it was saying something had led them to think about what was different, or special, or attractive, about saying something *that* way. They were thinking about some of the most important questions of form, and that was a great result in my eyes.

The success of this assignment has led me to adapt it to other courses. My introduction to literature students now record poems using Audacity as part of a midterm assignment focused on identifying poetic elements and close-reading texts. I'm contemplating using audio in my survey course as well. Technological tools are only as good as the ideas and people they serve, but my experience (still fairly basic, at that) with audio technology has showed me that using it to bring the oral back into the "early American" classroom is a good idea, both for its potential to bring new perspective to literature and for the occasion it provides to reflect on how our time relates to the times of earlier writers and readers—and speakers.

Works Cited

Robson, Catherine. "Standing on the Burning Deck: Poetry, Performance,
History." *PMLA* 120 (2005): 148-62.