

MakeYourStory
**A Collaboration of Purdue Libraries and School of Information Studies and
The Brian Lamb School of Communication**

Episode 1: Elements of a Narrative Podcast

SH: Sarah Huber

AB: Annette Bochenek

TDS: Toni DeAztlan-Smith

TDS: If we can allow a student to have some time and to have the introspective about the emotional process behind their innovations and what they're making, those stories are going to compel people who maybe don't have any kind of frame of reference for their major or, you know, the computer sciences, let's say, they....they really don't understand it. A story, a story that tells the story about the making will connect to anybody and suddenly you have a whole new audience for what you've just made.

SH: Hello and welcome to our first episode of Make Your Story. Have you ever tried to make a pitch about a great idea you've had or something innovative you've created, but you weren't able to make a connection with people to fully share the value or importance of it? Well, in this podcast series, we're going to teach you how to tell a story as a way to engage people. Specifically, we are going to teach how to produce a narrative podcast to tell your story of ideation and creation. This series is a collaboration between the Purdue Libraries and School of Information Studies and the College of Liberal Arts Communication Program. My name is Sarah Huber, assistant professor of library science.

AB: And I'm Dr. Annette Bochenek, assistant professor of library science. In this first episode we will be talking with Professor Toni DeAztlan-Smith, who is an assistant professor of practice in the School of Communication and director of their digital media production center. Toni, thank you so much for joining us today.

TDS: Thanks for having me.

AB: Can you tell us what students typically think a podcast consists of?

TDS: Sure. When students come into our podcasting class, I think initially what they're used to are episodes where there are two people in a discussion usually. So something that....on a topic, so sports, dating, these kind of general topics, and then two people....and it's a very personality driven, very conversation driven....something that you would like into a morning show on radio and what we try and kind of pivot the students to is something that falls more along a narrative flow. Something that has that storytelling....story through line in it.

AB: Interesting. And yeah, today there are so many different ways to tell stories which ultimately begs the question really for me, why a podcast? What is it about this format that is so special and so intriguing right now?

TDS: I know it's funny because I think we think of podcasting as a new trend, but it's actually a very old medium, if you think of like the oral tradition. And I even remember as a kid listening to radio dramas in the eighties, I listened to the Star Wars radio drama that NPR did, for example. And, of course, there are those serial dramas from the orderly radio days, pre-television. So why podcasting? Well, there's kind of three significant things about it that I think attracts people. And one is just that the medium allows for intimacy and imagination to have someone's voice right in your ear. It's similar to getting told that story by a parent before bed, somebody very close to you. You have that voice....literally feels like you can have that crackle sound that's coming from that voice.....every intonation and expression that you hear and it's right there in your headphones, right? So there's an intimacy in that medium. And also because it requires.....there's no visual.....it requires quite a bit of imagination. I usually compare this to a really good book, right? If you're reading a book in your head, you're seeing the pictures. You're coming up with the characters in your head. And a really good podcast does that as well. It really stokes the imagination of the listener. Another reason that podcasts, I think, are very popular is that we want to share our voice literally and figuratively. So we all have stories that we want to tell, and we want to commiserate....basically want to tell these stories to make connections with others, even though in the podcasting medium, the host or the storyteller doesn't really get to see or sit with the listener. But just having that expression to tell the story and share your voice in the world and have it out there. And on the flip side for the listener having that voice shared with them, again....for....to commiserate to build that community. And then finally, specifically with the narrative....nonfiction narrative podcasts that I teach and that we're going to talk about in this series. We like them because they give us insight into worlds that maybe we're not....we don't have access to. I call this like getting that behind this peek...behind the scenes. So you're introducing and bringing people and drawing people into a world that you're familiar with, or an experience that you had that maybe they haven't. And so that kind of broadens the listener's world and frame of reference.

SH: Annette and I are kind of your students. We're learning a lot about podcasting through you. And through this collaboration, you gave us some podcasts to listen to specifically for the topic today. And one of them was a This American Life episode called Breakup #339....and listeners, every podcast we reference as examples in the series, we will always have the link to them on that podcast webpage on our website. So in this episode, it's all about breakups and it....there's four different stories. And one, which was my favorite started with this young woman who wanted to write a song to express her feelings through a breakup. And she got to talk with Phil Collins because her and her ex-love had this Phil Collins phase and she asked about good song writing tips. And then the next one was about a little girl trying to understand why her parents divorced, which was very touching. So I'm laughing and crying to these. And then another one was a woman who was talking with a guy who lost everything to a divorce

and her dog. And just wanted him to play ball. And he was.....and so it was through the voice of the dog....woman was telling the story through the voice of the dog. Like, okay, you need to move on or something more important here....the ball. You know, what I gained from listening to these was any one of these people could have said, yes, I'm sad, but I'll be fine. And keep that story to themselves. But instead, something really powerful happens. We get into their story, but also we connect and so there's empathy. And then there's connections all across the world because these podcasts can reach anyone.

TDS: For sure. And that's.....this episode is one of my favorites to introduce students to. It's an older episode, but it's.....especially the one you mentioned the first....act one of the torch song....writing that and talking about that breakup. It's one that they can identify with most....usually from that age group. This American Life, they are masters of the craft and they existed pre-podcasts, of course, they were considered radio show. They do so well is build a story. And it's a story arc just like you would with any other medium. They follow that journey. They take us on that hero's journey, which is a very classic technique and they use contemporary kind of topics. So it feels very fresh, but it's actually a very traditional way to go about telling a story. And it does because of the things we mentioned before, it does kind of emulate what we were saying about having that intimacy, especially the Starlee Kine....talking about her breakup. Something that in the way that she discusses it....in the details she uses it. These are all techniques, of course, and we can really imagine this breakup and feel it. It pulls at your heart and then the behind the scenes. So one thing that the kind of next step, the next layer truly elevates it as a story. And a podcast is her journey to write a torch song to try and get over this breakup, which leads to her interview with Phil Collins, which is kind of like almost like a cherry on the top of the whole kind of story and structure. And so even though whatever level I think a student's at and whatever topic they're at, these are kind of those techniques that you can draw from and make it your own with whatever you are writing to take that listener on the journey.

SH: Right. And okay so another couple of things come to mind. Like, even though this was incredibly well done....story.....there is sound effects. There is Phil Collins. There, you know, all this stuff is happening. It is so heartfelt. Like you really get pulled into and feel her pain. And she's so honest, brutally honest. It could be embarrassing in some ways, like I kept wanting this person, even though they didn't want me.

TDS: But that is part of the intimacy of this medium is the....it's not enough to have almost like a superficial overview on a topic. You really need to draw from yourself and make those intimate, vulnerable moments for the listener to be outstanding. And that's a very difficult self-exploration process that is also just part of this kind of work. Any kind of storytelling work really requires a storyteller to draw from themselves. And I think that's also where students and maybe any amateurs have the stumbling block to open themselves up to that vulnerability. And so once you can do that....once you acknowledge that, then you're creating a truly intimate piece that people will connect with.

SH: She could have just put out that song, right? And it's a good song and you can.....you can relate to it. But the story behind it, I mean, that is like.....that's what draws you in. And you hear it much differently, I think, than if.....with the story it has so much more meaning. And I think, you, know, how does this relate to telling our stories of what we're learning? What we're developing. What we're creating on campus and our.....our life as students. There is a process and there are failures and successes and different things, highs and lows, and there's an arc to it. And it's a way to really draw people in.

TDS: And I think there's an unacknowledged process....emotional process if you aren't....if you don't consider yourself an artist per se, you're not noting that process. I think the thing is artists note the process and the emotions they go through in their experiences. And, I guess, non-artists, they kind of just do the thing, right? And so we have these amazing students on campus who are making incredible innovations and they're not thinking about the highs and lows when they get to the point they're getting to that end product. And so I think allowing them some time, if we....if we can allow students who have some time and to have....be introspective about the emotional process behind their innovations and what they're making, those stories are going to compel people who maybe don't have any kind of frame of reference for their major or, you know, the computer sciences, let's say they.....they really don't understand it. A story, a story that tells the story about the making will connect to anybody. And suddenly you have a whole new audience for what you've just made.

SH: Yeah. And it'll inspire them, right? Like when I listened to this breakup, I mean, she sounded young, you know, and I'm not young but I thought, wow she makes me want to be reflective and think of my experiences, you know, what I was feeling during different breakups and to live on a deeper level.

TDS: Yeah. And how cool is that, that a story.....a 15 minute story....audio story can do that, right?

SH: So you've mentioned the hero's journey. And I think that is a really great way to approach a story. And when I think of hero's journey, I think of Joseph Campbell, but can you tell us what your definition of a hero's journey is?

TDS: I think we focus on the hero work versus the journey word more so, so it might be better to say protagonist journey, I guess, because it kind of seems like there's something to conquer. It's just identifying an order from the beginning point to the end point and then constructing your story so that that order is represented. That arc is there. So we kind of look to make it really simple as saying beginning, middle, end of a story. And ideally you have one person, typically in a podcast it's yourself. So in the example of the breakup episode Starlee Kine, the young woman.....she's going through a breakup and it's her.....she chronicles her journey through that breakup to.....to the end, which is creating a song, a torch song. So that's, that's what I essentially, I guess, meant by that hero's journey, if that makes sense.

SH: You sent us a Grammar Girl's episode where Laura Bergells was interviewed and she paraphrases Kendra Hall's three parts set-up for a good story in her book, *Stories that Kick*, and she says....you said beginning, middle, and ending. And I liked this three part normal then an explosion, and then the new normal. And I think of that as a journey. And it's a narrative arc. And, like you said, a narrative is just a story. We're just telling a story. And people want to see, you know, where someone began and then something disrupted everything and they're different. They come out different.

TDS: Totally applicable to podcast scene or any kind of story that someone's telling because we all want that climactic moment of change for.....on that journey, right? And see how it all shakes out.

SH: Yeah absolutely. And anytime we, you know, take part in.....I'm going to approach something. I'm going to do something in the process of creating or making something or contributing to something innovative. You....you go into it one way. You start doing your own work, working with others. You start your research. You start, you know, and you're changed and you've created something. Something is very different at the end.

TDS: And I bet that these students who are making things and experiencing, let's say through a lab or a research project, the change is probably one that maybe they were able to do something that they never imagined they could.

SH: I....I know that for myself, when I approach something that I want to create, I am a very different person at the other end. You're right. There's an internal.....and people can relate to that.

TDS: And I think being able to write that podcast out will give, you know, give students the opportunity to acknowledge that because it usually goes unacknowledged.

AB: You had us listen to as one of your suggested podcasts, a podcast coming from the Ted radio hour. This episode specifically dealt with Tracy Edwards and her portion of the segment called, *What a Sailboat Can Teach You that a Classroom can't*. This episode broadly focused upon how people of all ages can learn outside of the classroom. Obviously this episode stemmed from March 2020 when COVID-19 hit. And so many classrooms were closed and taken to the virtual format. The episode itself certainly hit home for a lot of listeners, whether they were students or parents, et cetera. And so in that Ted radio hour episode that focused on many different stories of learning outside the classroom, Tracy Edwards discussed her challenges with learning inside of the traditional classroom, if you will. And instead learning far more on her own as a result of departing from that traditional learning setup encouraged by her mother who was wholly supportive of her kind of finding her place in the world and then learning in a way that worked for her. And so she learned far more on her own by learning to sail and coordinating an all-female team of women that was just determined....just as determined as she was to win an otherwise male dominated race. And so what struck me about this story is not only the commentary that Edwards offered about her life, but also the ways in which the host of the podcast really helped elicit this great story from

her. They certainly reacted to the story that she was telling and had this fine ability to prompt Edwards and really keep her at ease when discussing these really difficult moments in her life. And there were some moments in the story that used sound effects, and that was certainly a coordinated and added into the episode really well. And we had sound effects like rushing water, for example, and we were talking about the race and sailing and even actual audio clips from the race. And we hear Edwards being interviewed then and there. We hear the crowd cheering....things like that. That really helped me imagine myself in the moment and alongside Edwards, experiencing this adventure with her and ultimately feeling all the more proud of what she had accomplished along the way. But really before we get into devising a podcast episode and certainly one as intriguing as that one, we do need structure. There is a workflow. It is a process. It is an art that really needs attention and so many different facets to create this amazing final product. So I was hoping you could tell us a bit about the workflow and what it's like for coming up with a strong workflow for a narrative podcast?

TDS: Yeah, absolutely. You're totally right in saying that there's quite a bit of work behind it and this trips some students up because, again, they're more familiar with the format of two people kind of having a discussion and just capturing their ideas. But when we really want to craft the narrative podcast, you need to do all this work behind the scenes before you can even get to that recording stage. So we look....if you want like a laundry list, we have identify your story. That's very important. Having a focused story idea is helpful for the listener, but it's more.....it's more so helpful for the creator because once you start delving into a story, you realize that it can go into many different directions. So you really need to think what is my story? I usually tell students to even start off with once upon a time and then move from there. Just boil it down to that one line because to get you started, because that is what we're aiming for....that story. It can't be about everything.

AB: And it's so interesting because.....

TDS: And then you.....

AB: Oh, I'm sorry. It's so interesting because, I mean, you.....you are the one in control. You're deciding the scope of your story whether it's a larger, longer story you want to tell or maybe just a moment in your life or a moment in a situation that you really want to highlight that you feel was a big, maybe, lesson to you. Or a strong story in and of itself that could.....could reasonably fill up the duration of a full podcast episode.

TDS: I think no matter how broad the topic may be, the size of it isn't dictated by that topic. You.....you still need these main kind of components for the topics. So whether it is a coming of age story or a story of me coming to class, both of those can be just as heavy and weighted and take just as long or short, believe it or not, depending on how you focused it and how you combine those elements around it. And what's really nice and what I try and get my students to do is find a way to combine the two, right? So the example you gave about we talked about Tracy Edwards and the sailing, the topic at hand was what you learn outside of the classroom. And that was the big.....bigger

story, what we learn outside of the classroom. And then the story of Tracy was almost a chronological biography of her life and how she got to the point of success as a sailor. And so that in itself, it's....it's kind of interesting that almost....to think about the size of the story versus the weight of the story. And it could be a whole class. I give a whole class on identifying your story, but that's why you can get lost in it. And so being able to start off with once upon a time, you know, this is a story about this, and then just keep that as your through line. And then the rest of the components will get added on to give it that fullness of the...of the story and the narrative arc. Research. I had mentioned before that one thing that we enjoy about podcasts is that it gives a behind the scenes. If you do enough research, you will find these nuggets that I tell my students are the unGoogleable stuff. The stuff you can't find on Google. These are the things that you can only pick up from really reading through the documents, going to the events, interviewing people. And then now you have these nuggets of information that you can sprinkle in that really enlighten the listener and gives them what I call those moments of mental floss. Have you heard this term?

AB: Tell us about mental floss.

TDS: Mental floss. So I try and tell my students in your research to find the mental floss. And mental floss is this idea of picking a brain. I'm sure we've all heard that and finding these....like finding these bits that kind of shock us, or kind of surprise us. And so that's kind of the idea behind that mental floss. And that's what you're looking for in storytelling when you do your research. So you're not doing a research like you would for your class or research paper. You're looking....you're sifting....you're doing your research so you can sift through it to find those little nuggets to include in your narrative. Another task on your to-do list is going to be to conduct the interviews. And what's really important is that you go into your interviews knowing what your story is. Because interviews could go all over the place and you really want it to focus on the story at hand so that, one, you're not sifting through hours and hours of tape later but also so the person you're interviewing knows where....where you're living. It kind of gives them an anchor and then they can....you can start teasing out a....what we call midwifing them into eloquence and helping them tell their story and on that focus topic. And your research will help you in that you....if you go to interview without research, you're basically asking that person to tell you everything about the topic. And that makes for actually a very boring interview. And what you really want from your interview, right, is that....the emotion, the insight, the behind the scenes. So if you do your research, you know what to ask about so that you can get to those sentiments and get that....that nice sound that will really connect with your audience. Another task on your to-do list....you're going to have to write a script. Students do not like this part. And I think it's because when you listen to a podcast, it feels so natural. It gives you this idea that it's unscripted when really it's just really well written. And if you have a really well written script, it won't come off as scripted. So getting your interview, having your research done and then, you know, your story. You're able to write out this script that will be recorded. On your to-do list, again, more stuff identifying and collecting those additional elements. You had mentioned in the Tracy Edward piece that they had recordings from the events. That's part of that collecting of elements, getting that

archival elements, sound from the cell phone video, sound from the events. Just because you weren't there doesn't mean you can't bring the....the listener there. Ambient audio is another component. So the ambient audio or what we call field recorded audio, the ambient or wild field sound you might need to collect if there's something going on that you can go record yourself. And then another kind of collection that I also tell students is the 911 call. If you think of it that way, getting that piece of that file of audio, you know, you can add that in there. Sound effects are also useful elements to include to signify something....a frying sound for cooking, let's say. Just think as widely and broadly. Cast a wide net on what kind of audio elements you can include to enhance your story. And then, of course, identifying some music that you will be using to create those beats and pacing. And then once you have that and you've recorded your script and you have all your pieces together, you edit your audio files using some kind of software like Audacity, which is free. I use Adobe Audition and the work, additionally, when it comes to it, believe it or not now is promoting it and getting people to listen. So that is also including the work in the podcasting world that might not be for other type of mediums.

AB: Toni, thank you so much for sharing your thoughts and input with us during this first episode for this season of Make Your Story. You've mentioned so many wonderful concepts and elements of creating a narrative podcast, and we'll be exploring each of these in greater depth in the episodes to come. And in the meantime, thank you listeners for joining us as well. We're so excited to have you along with us on the journey. And if you do decide to create your own narrative podcasts, we do have a worksheet set up for you that also mentions the different concepts Toni was chatting with us about. So if you'd like to brainstorm your ideas and sketch out some thoughts you have for a potential narrative podcast, that is there for you as a resource.

TDS: Thanks for having me. And it was great to chat about this. And if any students would like some assistance as they formulate their story ideas, I'm happy to be a soundboard for them. And they can reach me by email deaztlan@purdue.edu....that's D-E-A-Z-T-L-A-N@purdue.edu.