

You Be the Justice

Learning media law through role-playing podcasts

In our Media Law and Ethics class, we want students to do more than just memorize court cases, names and facts. We want them to be able to incorporate and apply what they have learned to real-world situations, and share that knowledge with others in a way that is both consumable and comprehensible.

To that end, we brought together the “justices” of the Supreme Court and podcasting technology.

Our assignment, “You be the Justice,” lets each of our 45-54 student to select a Supreme Court justice from one of six pre-selected cases. They are then instructed to extensively research that person and their judicial philosophy, as well as the First Amendment-focused case. Instead, however, of a sterile and formulaic research paper, these students are given the option of “becoming” the justice by recording a podcast in character.

Writing a paper about a subject can lead to a lot of legalese and technical talk that does not really reflect understanding of a case or the resulting law. The need to actually discuss orally pulls from a different part of the brain and requires students to know and understand their material, but also be able to articulate it conversationally. It is very hard to fake knowledge in that format, and student have shown a much stronger ability to connect class concepts from the entire semester in this format.

PREPARATION

To prepare, students are taught podcasting technology and techniques, including recording an editing of audio in garage band, and they listen to numerous podcasts to get a sense of style and quality. They also sign up for a Soundcloud account on which to post recordings.

They then start researching the justice’s history, judicial philosophy and significant cases of which they have been part. They examine personality traits, hobbies and characteristics. They then examine the assigned case, the justice’s role in determining the decision, and look at ways to apply the precedent cases they have learned earlier in the semester.

Students next craft a script that allows personality and character to come along with facts and cases in a narrative form. Often students craft that narrative into a themed podcast, such as “Just Chat,” “Let’s Get Judicial” and “Chief Chat, the only podcast dedicated to discussing Supreme Court Decision with justices past and present.”

We bring in a guest speaker who has argued before the court to discuss personality traits of each justice and the students get to practice their own “voice” to get real-time feedback on how realistic is their character and argument.

Students also realize they need not be alone in discussing their cases, and many requested the opportunity to collaborate on their projects to create dialogue and debate. This gives a chance for the justices to interact in ways few of us get to see or hear.

CRITERIA

All podcasts are judged on the following criteria:

- * Character development
- * Character's history
- * Judicial philosophy
- * Justice's significant cases
- * Understanding of this case
- * Precedent cases
- * Maintaining character
- * Script development
- * Quality of citations
- * Quality of recording and posting success

As I mentioned above, students are allowed to “opt in” to the podcasting assignment. Those who do not want to use technology to may write their project instead. The

character-based format, still apply, however, and students have pursued that through such styles as book chapters, blog posts, a series of letters to other legal scholars, and even a website created just for the assignment from the perspective of Samuel Alito.

The podcast has these additional criteria:

- * Script development: Every podcast must first be crafted into a script that clearly outlines the narrative flow, facts and character.
- * Quality of recording and posting success: Your podcast will be evaluated in terms of fact-based reporting, audio clarity, editing and posting success.

The has these additional criteria:

- * Quality of narrative structure: How engaging is this written narrative throughout. Is it clearly structured and does the reader stay engaged?
- * Writing quality—facts, grammar, etc.: Mistakes in grammar, spelling and facts significantly impact your paper’s grade.

Sample Timeline

3/21: Students select justice and case for final project, and post to Canvas.

4/1: Determine in what format you will do your final project, if you are working alone or collaboratively, and what are they key points of the case (250-300 words).

4/11 Final Project Draft outline due in Canvas. 4/18 Bring final paper/podcast to work in class. 4/20 Final projects due in Canvas!

We launched this project in the Fall 2015 semester. When initially informed of the assignment, 67 percent of students (30/45) said they would do the paper and the remainder said they wanted to do the podcast. Of those who planned to do the podcast, 8 of 15 (53 percent) said they wanted to collaborate.

After this initial selection, students were provided training in what is a podcast, how it can be recorded and edited, and how it would be posted.

After that instruction, 60 percent of respondents, we had a complete flip (30/45) decided to do the podcast and of that number, 21 decided to collaborate (70 percent), with the most prevalent reasons “I thought it would be fun,” “I thought it would lessen the work load” and “I thought I could explore the topic better.”

When surveyed after the assignment, 100 percent of students who did the podcast said they felt they learned the material better than if they would have done an academic paper.