

FROM THE FIELD

For the Record: Assessing Speaking Skills through Recorded Projects

Sara Schroeder

Summary: Video conferencing platforms have been invaluable classroom tools for remote teaching. However, after many months of this type of instruction, many are craving alternative ways to interact in our classrooms. For those teachers who are willing to experiment with audio and video applications, there are opportunities to spark students' creativity and re-engage them in class speaking projects that do not involve Zoom.

Keywords: speaking projects, assessment, smartphones

There's no doubt teleconferencing software has been a boon to teachers and students over the past year and a half, allowing us to see and interact with our students in real time. However, after hours spent in remote classes and meetings, students and teachers are experiencing Zoom burnout. One way for teachers to fight this new type of fatigue is to offer alternatives to projects which would otherwise be delivered via screen sharing. Recorded presentations and projects offer such an alternative.

From the perspective of assessment alone, recorded projects give teachers the opportunity to provide more thorough and well-rounded feedback on speaking skills.

When teachers rely on live presentations to assess speaking skills, there are simply too many things to take into consideration simultaneously, such as content, pronunciation, body language, and fluency. When students create recorded projects, this allows the teacher to watch or listen to a response, or part of a response, as many times as necessary, paying attention to different aspects of the spoken project on each re-listen. Recording presentations also allows students to watch their own presentations and evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses.

Requiring students to record speaking projects also gives them a chance to record and re-record until they produce a



(Figure 1: The homepage of the author's website)

response they feel satisfied with. As students re-record, this means more speaking practice. Moreover, recording outside of class time removes certain elements that may raise affective filters, like peer pressure, interruption, or self-consciousness. In addition, students can usually choose to make a recording in a place they feel comfortable, like in their room at home. Feeling at ease may help students produce better speech.

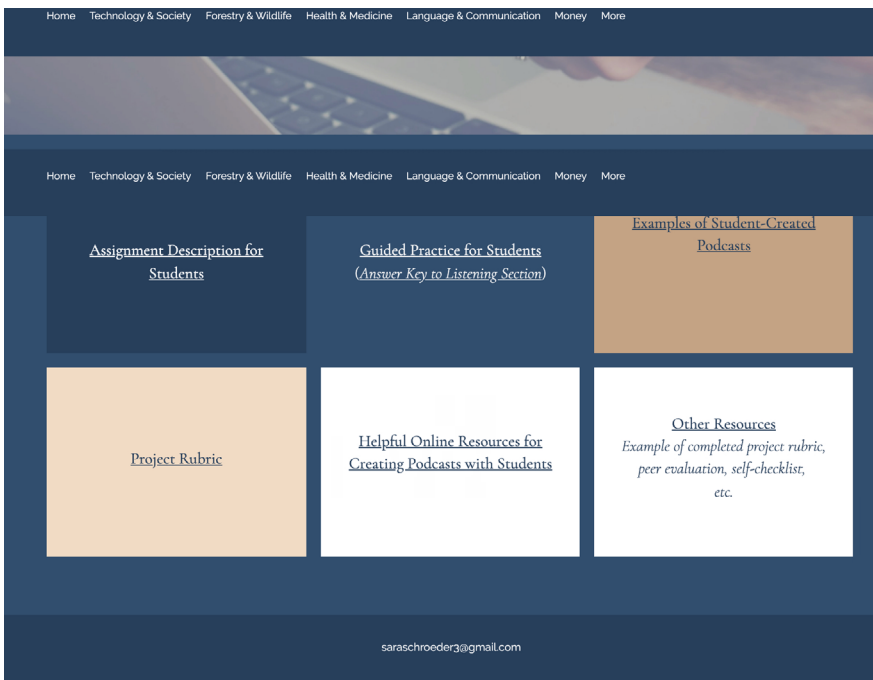
All of the projects I will discuss below are done outside of class time, and they're designed to assess a variety of speaking skills—and listening skills as well. Additionally, I wanted to move away from the live-remote type model, but I didn't want to get rid of the audience, so each project has a peer-teaching component to it. The three recorded projects which I'll discuss below are a mix of audio and video projects, all of which students can record easily on their smartphones and share with the teacher via email, [Box](#), or a Google Drive folder. Cameras and microphones on smartphones are getting better with each new model that comes out, and many students are already comfortable creating content on their phones, so they tend to like these projects. (If your students don't have smartphones, there are free sites online that students can use instead, such as [Speakpipe](#) and [Vocaroo](#).)

The first project is a recorded public service announcement (PSA). This works well with a wide variety of academic topics. The idea is for the students to be persuasive in a very concise presentation. The three times that I've done this project, the unit was on health and wellness. I started out by having students listen to several actual radio PSAs that were each about 30-60 seconds long. I wanted to provide real-world models for this project. I also used this as a listening exercise. Students paraphrased the message, the story, and supporting statistics

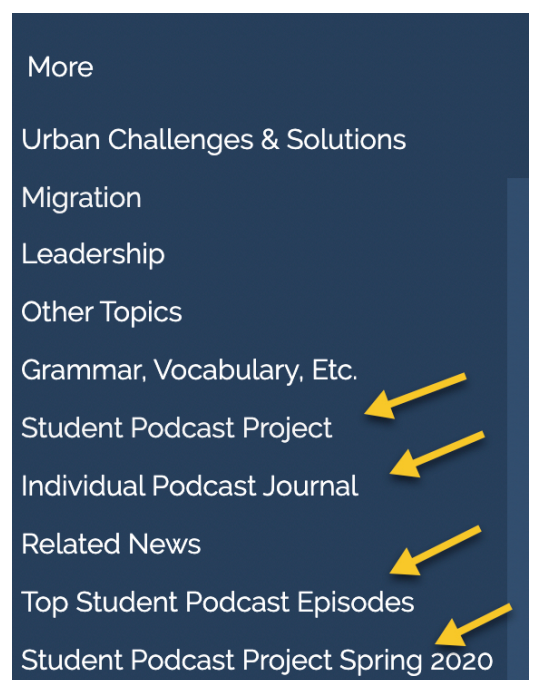
or information that each message provided. Then we discussed which messages were most persuasive and why. For topics related to health, there are many PSAs available on [the CDC's website](#). but it is also easy to find PSAs online on topics like pollution, animals, and bullying, and share them with students.

In making their own PSAs, students had to choose a basic topic and message related to health—for example, students focused on topics such as smoking, eating disorders, and cancer screening. Students were required to conduct research to find supporting facts or statistics to help persuade their listeners to follow the advice given in their PSA. They created scripts for their announcements, and finally, they made simple voice recordings which could be shared with the teacher and classmates. Recordings can be played in or outside of class time; in either case, the audience can take notes on the message and the supporting facts.

The next recorded project which has been a hit with my students is a video tour. For this project, students created videos for some of their favorite places outside the classroom—this could be their dorms, a neighborhood park, or a favorite shop at the mall. Students record themselves (either as a voice-over or as the star of their own video) showing and telling their favorite features of the place they have chosen. If relevant, students also discuss how to get to the destination from the university, and they provide recommendations on what to do in that place. This project allows students to discuss something they feel interested in and familiar with, allowing them to be informal and conversational—a great tool for practicing everyday speech. These videos are also shareable on your school's learning management system, or in a Google or Box folder. This project can also serve as encouragement



(Figure 2: The author's Student Podcast Project page)



(Figure 3: Full assignment descriptions, rubrics, and more)

for new students to get out and explore their community or school.

The last project I'll discuss here—and my favorite—is student-created podcasts. This project mostly closely mirrors the traditional research presentation we are accustomed to assigning for midterm or final presentations. Students must do in-depth research, combined with a minimum of one interview, to answer a specific research question. The free mobile app students use to create podcasts in my class is called [Anchor](#), and it contains every tool students need to create a podcast episode. Students record audio using the app and can add background music or musical interludes with just a click. Sound files can be easily trimmed or split and rearranged. The app also allows students to conduct interviews remotely, which has, of course, been an important feature over the past year and a half. One of my favorite podcast episodes made by a student was a look into supersonic passenger jets. This student wanted to predict whether this type of transportation will return as a travel option in our lifetime. He conducted research on the Concorde and why it was ultimately retired. To get a sense of the future of air travel, he conducted remote interviews with two air-traffic controllers who had some experience with Concorde when it was still in operation. The air-traffic controllers my student interviewed were in a different country than the student who interviewed them. Setting up a remote interview on the Anchor app was as easy as emailing the two interviewees a link. Once they accessed the link, Anchor recorded the entire conversation, and it was up to the student to cut certain parts

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of the interview or intersperse supporting information. As students work to edit their sound files, this means that they must listen again and again to get the timing right, to make sure sound files are heard in a logical order, etc. With all the app's built-in features, the final product of an Anchor-made podcast has the potential to sound quite professional. You can find examples of my students' podcasts at [my website](#) (see Figure 1). This OER site also has full assignment descriptions, rubrics, and more (see Figures 2 & 3).

There are many other recorded projects I could discuss. I have also assigned movie reviews, required students to submit a first draft of a presentation, and had students record themselves mimicking an audio clip to match rhythm and intonation. These types of projects provide variety in the types of assignments we use to assess our students' speaking skills. Additionally, I have found that

recorded projects often turn out to be among the most memorable and meaningful assignments my students do in class. My students have told me that they've shared their recordings with friends and family via social media or email. This also works as a motivational tool for them to really do their best and make it something they're proud to share. As a teacher, I have found these types of projects more fun to grade as well, and they give students the opportunity to be more creative than a slide presentation. I do still assign slide presentations, of course, and screen sharing is an excellent tool for any teachers who are still working with students remotely. Recorded projects are, among other things, a way for teachers and students to stave off Zoom fatigue.



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