

# In Schodack, English teachers discover the power of podcasts

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SPECIAL CORRESPONDENT

While home sick last year, English teacher Heather Flood followed a friend's recommendation and listened to "Limetown," a podcast series about 375 residents in a small Tennessee town who disappeared.

In case you aren't among the 36 percent of Americans who have listened to a podcast or the 49 percent who say they are familiar with podcasts, the term refers to digital audio files that typically can be downloaded for free off the Internet. They can be subscribed to (like a periodical) and played on computers or portable devices such as phones and tablets.

Flood, who works in the Schodack school district in Rensselaer County, was spellbound. The story was outlandish but the documentary style so convincing that it was hard to tell right away whether the story is fact or fiction. (It's the latter.)

She talked about it with a colleague, Caitlin Colwell, who has taught at Maple Hill for 10 years. They had shared a class at Siena College, and Colwell befriended Flood when she joined the district three years ago.

Soon they had a proposal. Flood, who teaches ninth graders, wanted to devote a six-week unit to "Limetown." Colwell, who teaches 11th graders, imagined a two-month unit on the first season of the award-winning "Serial" podcast, a real-life investigation of the 1999 murder of an 18-year-old female high school student in Baltimore.

In both classes, students would listen to episodes of the respective podcasts. Lesson plans would involve plenty of discussion and some essays. They saw it as a new way to engage students and get them to think critically.

Colwell took the idea to the high school principal, Ron Agostinoni.

"Go for it," was his quick answer.

"We have a charge here as a district – administrators, teachers – to take risks," he



Above, teachers Caitlin Colwell, left and Heather Flood talk about the Limetown podcast. Right, Schodack 11th-grade students (from left) Joe Merhige, Geo Cruz and Mike Jones are involved in the Serial podcast on their Chromebooks.

✦ Photos by Barbara Bennett

told *On Board*. "That is what we want our students to do. The answer is rarely 'no.' The answer is, 'Let's figure it out.'"

The teachers were a little nervous because "Serial," especially, has plenty of mature content. They agreed that playing "Serial" wouldn't be prudent for an audience younger than high school juniors.

On the other hand, *Romeo & Juliet* has more shocking content than "Serial," said Agostinoni. He sat in on discussions in both classrooms. It was obvious that students "are really into the material," he said.

That's not a big surprise, as both podcasts have been highly popular. Season 1 of "Serial" had 40 million downloads in the year of its release (2014). And Limetown was named the best science fiction podcast of 2016 by Popular Science magazine.

A spinoff of the popular National Public Radio show "This American Life," (which is also available as a podcast), "Serial" will enter its third season in the summer of 2017.



The podcast sheds light on the complicated and shifting story that led to the suspect's arrest, trial and subsequent guilty verdict. The audio series raised more questions than answers and ultimately convinced a judge to approve a retrial.

In class, students were given transcripts to follow along. They used Google Maps and Google Earth to view a location that was key in a timeline constructed by prosecutors – a Best Buy parking lot. (While a prosecution witness claimed to have received a phone call from a pay phone in that parking lot, there is a dispute on whether such a phone ever existed.)

"It definitely wasn't your average English class," said senior Dylan Rossiter, who was part of Colwell's class last year.

The classroom discussions "opened my

mind up a lot more," Rossiter said. "You'd have a bias, and be certain something happened a certain way, then you'd realize things didn't add up."

He took a particular liking of the material because he's visually impaired.

In Flood's class, ninth graders became interested in how the "Limetown" series was produced. Through her social media contacts, Flood was able to arrange a Skype session with "Limetown's" writers and producers. They told students it's easier to get into podcasting than filmmaking.

Colwell and Flood aren't the first English teachers to incorporate podcasts into their lessons. California high school teacher Michael Godsey did away with "Hamlet" in favor of "Serial" as a primary text. Godsey told a reporter for the website Slate in 2014 that his inspiration was Common Core standards, which among other things, emphasize critical thinking skills and call for many high school teachers to incorporate more nonfiction into the classroom.

Both podcasts give teachers the opportunity to talk about all the things English teachers typically focus on – characterization, plot development, and use of literary devices, as well as rhetoric and argumentation.

While some podcasts contain adult material and language, there haven't been any complaints from parents or students about the material and Flood quipped that "students probably hear worse on the school bus."

Both teachers beamed when describing how they'd sometimes hear their classes being discussed excitedly in the school hallways.

Flood and Colwell recently presented a regional workshop entitled, "Have You Heard? Podcasts as Innovative 21st Century Texts for the CCSS English Classroom." They hope to win grants to send them to a national conference next winter.

When *On Board* visited the teachers in Schodack, they were both preparing to reintroduce podcasts in classes this spring.

Colwell said she has a simple rule: "I don't teach anything I don't love."

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