

E IS FOR EXPRESSIVE: BRANDING AND CUSTOMIZING E-PORTFOLIOS IN AUDIO EDUCATION

DANIEL A. WALZER

University of Massachusetts Lowell, Lowell, MA, USA

A tightly edited demonstration reel showcasing the best snippets of recording studio production, live mixes, broadcast and sound design, music and multimedia compositions, product and interface development, and creative thesis research are a few of the crucial elements to include in the undergraduate audio student's electronic portfolio. Final capstone courses often give students the opportunity to refine their projects, take part in an internship or co-op, and prepare the résumé to research career prospects.

Emerging and affordable web-based and mobile technologies, rich with new media applications, allow undergraduate audio students to create an individualized digital narrative that extends beyond the demo reel. Students sculpt their creative, artistic, technical, and reflective personality through video diaries, thoughtful use of new media applications, search engine optimization tools, and targeted networking. This presentation considers the expressive ways audio educators should carefully guide students to create a significant web-based brand identity, giving employers deeper insights into their complete audio-centered persona, thus enhancing employment prospects after graduation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Undergraduate audio education, a nascent degree pathway in colleges and universities, emphasizes the demo reel as a tangible product for expectant graduates to secure an internship or entry-level employment in an audio or media-related field.

Students enrolled in a production-focused track compile their demo reel with studio and live mixes, music production samples, original compositions, editing and sound design work and multimedia excerpts. Students enrolled in a research-driven track include writing samples, instrument and software prototypes, and a comprehensive thesis intended to highlight their specialization. In both pathways, undergraduates commonly include content gleaned from upper-level core classes in the portfolio in their last year.

The drive towards realizing a tangible product – be it a demo reel, recital, installation or showcase underscores the student's technical skill, musical and sonic creativity, and ability to work with various actors in team-based environments.

Although the demo reel and associated materials aid undergraduates in their job pursuit, these resources are not adequate without capable adaptation that establishes the audio student's aptitude to absorb and convey their acquired knowledge. An aggressive and unreliable job forecast stresses that sound engineering majors not only

grasp the technological phases of music production, but also reveal discernment concerning their thought and reflection habits.

2. THE TRADITIONAL AUDIO PATHWAY

Traditionally, wishful audio engineers and music producers received on-the-job training by starting as production assistants, runners, or office workers. Ambitious interns, by their mere presence and willingness to pay dues, received important vocational preparation on the intricacies of analog recording, session protocols and management, instrument and equipment repair, and music production aesthetics. This kind of hands-on education, referred to in this paper as “the audio pathway”, holds deep roots in an audio and music industry when healthy, abundant studios required skilled workers to produce content around the clock.

After demonstrating promise through tenacity and experience, entry-level workers moved away from menial labor and gradually picked up more studio access through jobs as a tape operator, and finally as an assistant engineer, session musician, or creative member of the production team.

These seldom-advertised opportunities, generated through informal referrals and networks, helped audio engineers to advance their careers, generate an impressive body of credits, and to amass specialized

job-related skills at the intersection of music, science, business, and technology.

As the audio industry adjusts to a rapidly changing music and entertainment business model, entry-level opportunities, once plentiful, are now fiercely competitive as more full-service recording studios close each year.

3. THE EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY

Gaining audio engineering and music production skills within higher education now replaces the traditional apprenticeship model long embraced by the record industry. Students matriculate through a prescribed course of study, assemble their reel, graduate and enter an increasingly fragmented job market driven by self-employed freelancers.

Teachers obliged to coach and mentor students on the realities of a changing market face the rising strain from higher education administrators and government organizations to confirm that expectant graduates have broadly defined skills while aligning audio curricula that meets industry standards [1].

Institutions with upper-level capstone or practicum courses address heuristic, technological, and communication-based aims through pertinent curricular design. Although modules vary by institution, capstone courses include collaborative recording projects, recitals, installations, exhibitions, crew membership for theater and film projects, research theses, instrument and software design, and internships with audio and media companies.

In the following paragraphs, this paper outlines curricular suggestions, designed to enhance the undergraduate’s entrepreneurial view, multiplatform communication abilities, reflective practice, and the capacity to apply focused research using new media tools to procure employment.

These pedagogical ideas do not replace the demo reel; rather each should enrich current efforts to guide students towards lasting self-sufficiency in their career track. This paper frames the E-portfolio in a broader perspective; a view that links digital storytelling, personalized content, and reflection with novel occupational inquiry – expanding past the demo reels and resume normally used for employment in the music business. Likewise, this paper suggests that an insightful dossier heightens the anxious pupil’s job search and provides the candidate influence on his or her tactical expansion in an already-packed entertainment and audio market.

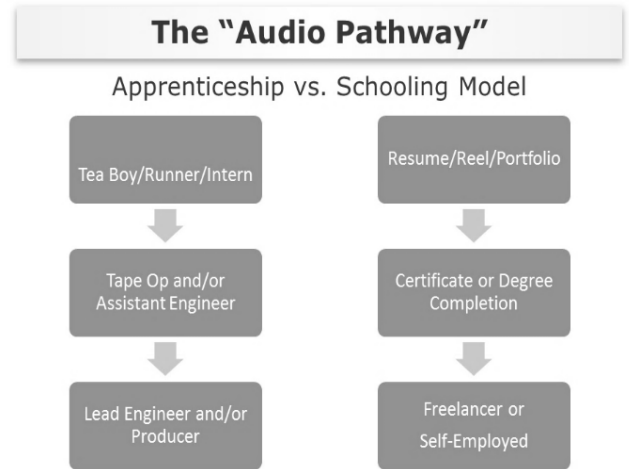


Figure 1 – The Audio Pathway

4. ENTREPRENEURIAL COMMUNICATION

Recording studios in higher education institutions offer undergraduate audio students an essential laboratory to create, fix mistakes, and hone their music production skills under the watchful direction of experienced teachers. Pairing appropriate recording studio case studies as accompanying material in an audio course highlights industry trends, and encourages students to collaborate with and respect the artist’s vision for their work [2]. Emphasizing suitable client interaction, chiefly in recording sessions, should emulate professional ideals in related industries [3].

Media organizations often use freelance audio professionals to finish a project ahead of a tight deadline while simultaneously planning for the next major commercial venture [4]. Currently, little extant literature examines this rapid turnaround in the entertainment industry, both from an organizational position and from a free enterprise view [5]. This reinvention phase reveals the uncertainty, fluctuation, unpredictability, and fascination of such professions.

Eager sound engineers must plan for a seasonal and regularly erratic work calendar. When the opportunity arises, young pros gain experience working long hours in high-pressure situations to meet strict deadlines. This is not a new phenomenon; however, the student must customize their dossier to reflect their abilities to learn quickly and navigate such a fierce atmosphere. Capstone courses that guide and nurture these skills give students a major advantage once they graduate.

Newly minted audio graduates face an uphill climb establishing a network of contacts with whom such persons are familiar with and are likely to hire.

Undergraduates targeting work in specific locations compete with already established freelance professionals, many of whom spent years cultivating their networks, experience, and a body of work. Although centralized locations have certain benefits when training and accessing a large body of contacts, maintaining such connections requires tremendous time and effort and often with little payoff – hiring managers prefer engineers who are already established and many gigs are seldom advertised [6].

Indeed, soon-to-be graduates must be aware of these challenges and proactively research areas where they want to work and focus their electronic portfolio on localized production content that attracts hiring managers. Furthermore, beyond the demo reel, undergraduates must tailor their dossier to include some familiarity with current production trends in that field.

Although the music industry is replete with intersecting global movements, audio engineers interested in living and working in London, New York, Nashville, Austin, or Los Angeles should recognize that each urban center tends to present a certain production sensibility within certain genres. Adapting their electronic portfolio, demo reel, and supporting materials with location-specific content suggests that the emergent graduate has researched the area and understands the environment they hope to work in.

Productively identifying locations to live and work balances pragmatic research with proactive entrepreneurship. In this scenario, young audio engineers strategically align themselves with networks that share their artistic and social values – this approach differs from the traditional model of free enterprise espoused by the music industry and reflects trends in the non-profit sector [7]. Sound engineers, working both as self-employed entrepreneurs and as creative artists, must enlarge their business acuity, face the dangers of a competitive marketplace, and hone a strong aesthetic vision that differs from the values long-supported by the entertainment sector [8].

Guiding audio engineers towards a modern conception of creative entrepreneurship is a multifaceted process that must recognize trends in the music industry. Soon-to-be graduates must prepare for a freelance-driven model where staff positions at major recording studios are either nonexistent, or increasingly rare. Competition, by its very nature, breeds innovation. The seclusion creative beings experience in integrating their uncompromising vision of art for social progress with commercial accomplishment has more to do with industry's power to minimize the wider effect of originality as a bespoke practice on sympathetic communities – thus explaining why newer generations

of Millennials are reluctant to embrace the traditional model of entrepreneurship [9]. Sensitive teachers, aware of these rapidly changing audio industry trends, must help students to develop a healthy, flexible conception of entrepreneurship through related course discussions and activities.

The bigger matter at hand involves how upper-level audio classes assess a portfolio system, foster job search proficiencies, design practical experience through service projects or internships, and lead students towards sensible and quantifiable postgrad aspirations. Collaborating with audio industry professionals is most beneficial when articulating practicum aims that invite diverse perspectives, require consistent participation from business representatives, and include a strong pedagogical structure that values the teacher-practitioner model [10, 11].

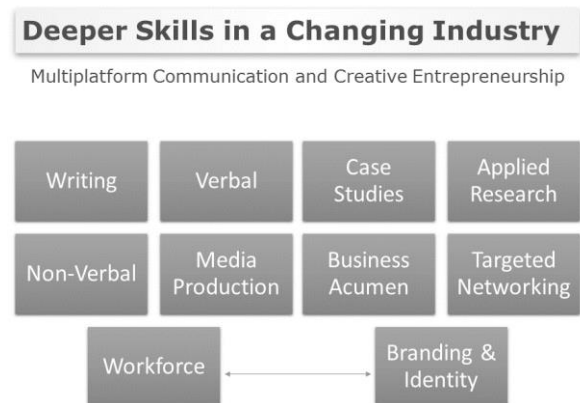


Figure 2 – Evolving Skills

Although the competencies in Figure 2 are not exhaustive, each addresses the central aspects of multiplatform communication and creative entrepreneurship. All phases of communication, including those found in the workplace, must further the undergraduate's career research. Bearing in mind these trends, universities and professional review committees must intelligently foster their shared operating partnership to concentrate on student needs and satisfy learning objectives.

Moreover, the E-portfolio is a digital manifestation of the audio student's capacity to adjust to shifting business tendencies while exhibiting aptitude across multiple communication areas. Institutions contemplating adding an audio-focused E-portfolio course in existing degree programs must take into account how interdepartmental collaboration and internship experiences improve student-learning aims along with professional development opportunities for faculty and staff [12].

5. NEW MEDIA AND E-PORTFOLIOS

Much like traditional creative writing, for more than two decades digital storytelling (DST) has inspired others to share original accounts and incorporate simple multimedia elements into each narrative [13]. Freidus and Hlubinka observe that grasping digital storytelling concepts moves each person to communicate across platforms, offering the learner a positive, reflective outlook on their creative and learning undertakings through pre-production, scripting, and production [14].

Malita and Martin advise that students link worth to their creative storytelling practice; DST inspires students' logical and artistic judgement and their narratives frequently connect them to diverse communities that resonate with audiences – particularly Millennials engaged in a global, mutual transfer of ideas and data through the Internet [15].

For audio engineering students, digital storytelling draws interest from independent music, entertainment, and media networks [14, 15]. In this context, the students videotape themselves producing and recording music, evaluating the products they commonly use, blogging, and conversing with production specialists using a simple web camera, cell phone, or portable device. For job-search aims, the student produces a multimedia greeting and explores the web and mobile delivery options of their E-portfolio.

Digital Storytelling (DST)

Tangible Benefits

- Using media tools to communicate the student's narrative.
- Encourages multiplatform scripting, narration, revision and creativity.
- Reveals more about the student than a one-page cover letter and resume.
- Empowers students to control how their message is conveyed to employers.
- Requires the student to reflect on their learning.
- Beyond the demo reel, it's a tangible expression of acquired skills and knowledge.
- Cost-effective with Web 2.0 resources.
- Inspires students to use their research and analytical skills.

Figure 3 – DST Benefits

Conceiving the electronic portfolio requires that audio students critically evaluate the assets used to highlight their acquired body of knowledge and ability to synthesize information. The various phases of electronic portfolio creation demand those audio students see “production” from an alternate perspective; effectively employing media assets displays the audio engineer’s self-perception of their technical, artistic, and aesthetic

choices based on the media’s ability to communicate a comprehensive narrative – one that shows the student’s ability to learn [16]. Here, the student must consider how the media helps them to communicate their story, and how each chooses to control their narrative through ongoing, meticulous revision.

Although audio students use media samples to convey their thoughts, these assets do not include the demonstration recordings. In this case, production denotes the way each student communicates his or her expertise, works-in-progress, and overall personality. Research indicates the reflective practice via video diaries in undergraduate music capstone courses encourages consistent peer review from classmates and inspires future cohorts to explore their own scholarship in future semesters [17].

6. CURRICULAR OPTIONS

It is possible for audio students enrolled in upper-level capstone or recording classes to link their applied case studies with constructive, reflective practice. Incorporating a simple web camera, a phone, a mobile device, or web-based screen capturing software, the aspiring sound engineers now document microphone placement, plug in settings, digital audio workstation management, and offer important evidence confirming their role in the sessions.

In addition to faculty-provided case studies, these activities encourage students to debrief and gauge their recorded work [18]. The multimedia journal, complete with simple voice over narration and still images, enhances the student’s finished mixes. More significantly, the supporting documentation allows employers to consider how the student’s work evolves over time.

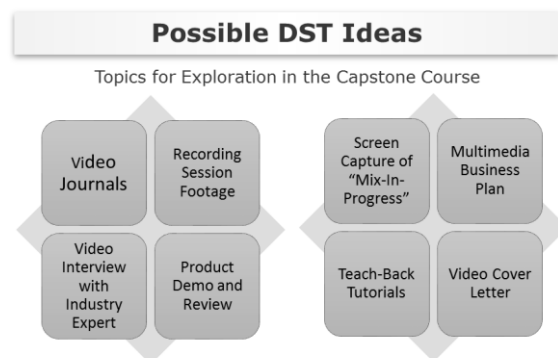


Figure 4 – DST Ideas

Another option, particularly useful in the last year, is for expectant audio graduates to identify successful candidates to model and interview such persons for a simple multimedia documentary. This project requires

the student to pinpoint entities demonstrating the productive entrepreneurial characteristics needed for success. Instructors may encourage students to look outside the audio and music industry for inspiration. The point of the exercise is to find persons that the audio student cares to emulate and learn from through strategic networking. After interviewing the expert, the soon-to-be graduate has solid material with which to draft a similar business plan, logo, company structure, and long-term forecast using readily accessible multimedia tools [19]. Other DST options include product reviews and tutorials.

As the electronic portfolio, demo reel, resume, and supporting materials near completion, instructors may encourage students to explore e-commerce trends that incorporate domain names, search engine optimization, and embedded players in an easy-to-use website for prospective employers to find [20]. Once these items are solidified, the audio student can customize and brand his or her comprehensive portfolio to attract likeminded networks.

Through strategic professional development workshops, higher education administrators, career services staff, industry partners, and audio faculty must identify a realistic set of exit competencies – designed to increase the audio student's chances of procuring steady employment after graduation.

7. FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

Audio education now intersects with creative entrepreneurship, applied research, non-profit organization, strategic marketing, e-commerce, and the digital humanities. Future qualitative case studies examining employer perceptions of audio and media-centered electronic portfolios must anticipate current trends in the freelance marketplace. Future research must explore the relationships among audio education, human resources management, service learning, web marketing, and curricular design.

Additionally, institutions considering digital storytelling as a curricular option must reflect on how tailoring the applicant's dossier embodies autonomy and enhances their career research skills. Fortunately, most web-based tools used in electronic portfolios are free and institutions need not incur great expense to begin exploring DST techniques in audio capstone courses.

The faculty may augment and customize these pedagogical techniques throughout the student's matriculation. Most importantly, digital storytelling need not replace the demo reel, resume, the cover letter, or internship. Rather, the multimedia E-portfolio, when pragmatically aligned with clearly defined exit

outcomes, should give students a complete set of technology-based means to navigate and adapt to the ultra-competitive audio industry in future years.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper is a revised adaptation of a presentation given at the Music & Entertainment Industry Educator's Association – Educator's Summit in Austin Texas in March 2015 [21]. The author wishes to thank both MEIEA and AES for the opportunity to present this ongoing education research.

9. REFERENCES

- [1] Thorley, M. "Embedding of Employer and Practitioner Input into Student Portfolios - Results of Project Commissioned by the UK Higher Education Academy." *Proceedings of the AES 50th International Conference*. Accessed 2 March 2015. <http://www.aes.org/e-lib/browse.cfm?elib=16839>.
- [2] Toulson, R. "Creation of Media Based Learning Material for Audio and Music Technology." *Journal on the Art of Record Production* 5 (2011): Accessed 2 March 2015. <http://arpjournal.com/creation-of-media-based-learning-material-for-audio-and-music-technology/>.
- [3] Slay, C. "Slaying the Starving Artist Paradigm and Teaching Professionalism in the Entertainment Business: The Entertainment Law and Professionalism Clinic." *Journal of the Music & Entertainment Industry Educators Association* 12, no. 1 (2013): 195-208. Accessed 3 March 2015. <http://alturl.com/qize8>.
- [4] Ferriani, S., G. Cattani, and C. Baden-Fuller. "The Relational Antecedents of Project-Entrepreneurship: Network Centrality, Team Composition and Project Performance." *Research Policy* 38, no. 10 (2009): 1545-1558. Accessed 12 January 2015. <http://alturl.com/jhvno>.
- [5] Ferriani et al. [4] p. 1548.
- [6] Ferriani et al. [4] p. 1549.
- [7] Bonin-Rodriguez, P. "What's in a Name? Typifying Artist Entrepreneurship in Community-based Training." *Artivate: A Journal of Entrepreneurship in the Arts* 1, no. 1 (2012): 9-24.
- [8] Bonin-Rodriguez [7] p. 9-10.
- [9] Bonin-Rodriguez [7] p. 9-15.
- [10] Thorley [1] p. 2.

[11] Toulson [2].

[12] Orrell, J. "Work-Integrated Learning Programmes: Management and Educational Quality." *Proceedings of the Australian Universities Quality Forum 2004*. Accessed 12 January 2015.
<http://tinyurl.com/o63kmkf>.

[13] University of Houston. "Educational Uses of Storytelling-What is Digital Storytelling?" *University of Houston College of Education*. Accessed 6 March 2015.
<http://digitalstorytelling.coe.uh.edu/page.cfm?id=27&cid=27&sublinkid=29>.

[14] Freidus, N., and M. Hlubinka. "Digital Storytelling for Reflective Practice in Communities of Learners." *ACM SIGGROUP Bulletin* 23, no. 2 (2002): 24-26. Accessed 2 March 2015.
<http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=962195>.

[15] Malita, L., and C. Martin. "Digital Storytelling as Web Passport to Success in the 21st Century." *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2010): 3060-3064. Accessed 2 March 2015.
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877042810005057>.

[16] Malita and Martin [15] p. 3061-3062.

[17] Tolmie, D. "Designing a Tertiary Music Institution Course to Create Industry-Ready Graduates." *Creative Arts Learning and Teaching Network Symposium* (2013): 136-160. Accessed 12 January 2015.
http://macha.itc.griffith.edu.au/dspace/bitstream/handle/10072/53812/89178_1.pdf?sequence=1.

[18] Toulson [2].

[19] Walzer, D. "Integrating Small Business Concepts into an Audio Production Program: How to Assist Audio Production Majors with the Transition into a Freelance Career." *Music Dish E-Journal* (2010): Accessed 6 March 2015.
<http://www.musicdish.com/mag/index.php3?id=12679>.

[20] Walzer, D. "Effective Integration of Web 2.0 in Streaming Media Courses." *Journal of Media Education* 2, no. 1 (2011) 18-24.

[21] Walzer, D. "Personal Narrative and Practical Application of Technology: Guiding Undergraduate Music and Audio Students Towards an Entrepreneurial Career Search." *Presentation at the MEIEA Educator's Summit – Austin TX* (2015). Accessed 10 May 2015 from
<http://alturl.com/x86p3>.