

History teacher helps tie the past to technology with first podcasts at BHS

By BARBARA NORKUS
Observer staff

Technology is ever-advancing. Even students at Battlefield High School who are not involved in the school's Information Technology program can take advantage of new technological advances. The Haymarket high school offers podcasting options for its students.

Podcasting, according to a George Mason University Web site that gives its instructors the opportunity to decide whether to create podcasts for students, is "making

audio files (usually voice recordings) available for users to access and listen to on their computers or portable audio devices."

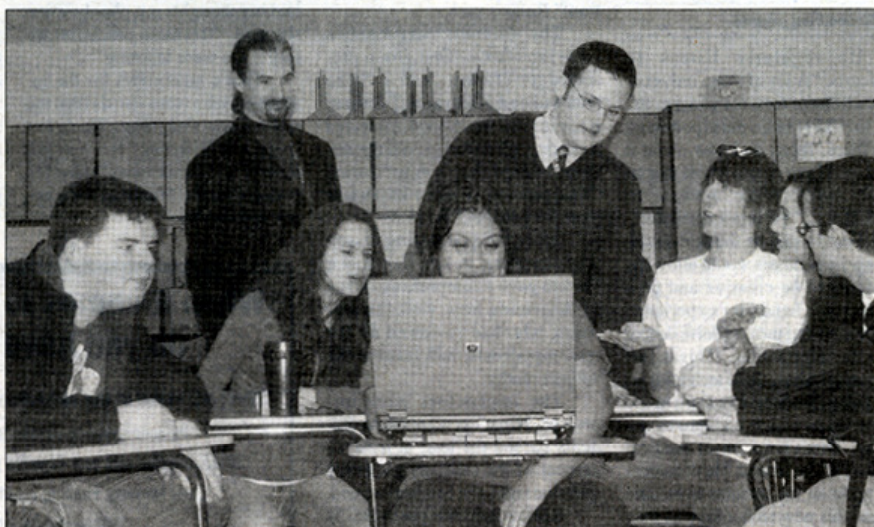
Battlefield High's Ryan Ferrera is in his second year of teaching history to juniors at the Haymarket school. He likes podcasting technology and wanted to use it for his students.

"I knew I wanted to do podcasting and I knew I had the section of curriculum I wanted to cover. I spent about an hour talking and planning the unit with Keith [Reeves]. I've never done it myself but I listen to podcasts on iTunes and thought, how can I take what [the students] are using and bring it into the classroom?"

Reeves, the school's instructional technology resource teacher, is a master at breaking down lessons into steps and applying the use of technology to the lesson. Reeves worked with Ferrera to make his vision a reality.

Ferrera assigned his history class students the task of creating podcasts through a "Changing America" podcast series. The students produced 30 episodes that examined "the changing face of the United States between 1861 and 1921," according to the Battlefield Web site podcast page.

Principal Amy Ethridge-Conti



Keith Reeves and Ryan Ferrera stand behind their students—from left: Daniel Callahan, Maria Babauta, Delmy Martinez, Andrew Utterback, Katherine Wren and Danny Drzal—while they complete a peer review session.

Barbara Norkus / the Bull Run Observer

was excited the students got to pursue this technological homework. "The podcasting project Mr. Ferrera's students participated in was a first for Battlefield. The project offered students a chance to research a topic and to create an audio file that could easily be accessed on an iPod [or personal computer] by any student, staff member or parent. Podcasting provides an

opportunity for students to practice using a variety of skills," she said.

"In addition to learning the content by actively researching facts, students have to focus upon making a connection with their audience without [the] benefit of seeing them. They spend time working on scripts and deciding how to record their information. They took the project seriously, and the results certainly show their efforts!" Ethridge-Conti stressed. Since Battlefield is a county school specializing in information technology, she said Ferrera's use of the latest medium was a huge step in the right direction for the school.

Michael Martin of Haymarket, a Battlefield junior, agreed. "This brings in a new age of inte-

grating technology and school work," he said.

Haymarket's Mackenzie Pretera said podcasting helped her understand the class. "It was an easier way to learn than just typical lectures," she said.

Ferrera has been teaching for four years. He graduated from the University of Maryland with an undergraduate degree in government and politics and a graduate degree in education. He is working on a second graduate degree in administration through the University of Virginia. He was savvy enough to understand how podcasting could help his students learn the history lessons.

continued on page 46

Teachers amazed: 90% pass history tests after learning through podcasting

continued from page 45

He regularly listens to podcasts. "A lot of time, universities will have lectures you can listen to. ESPN radio puts [podcasts] out there. Teens do know about it because iTunes has a whole part of [its] store with access to podcasts...." Ferrera explained.

Ferrera said he thought developing the podcasts would allow the students to be creative and give them some hands-on experience while allowing them to delve deeper into the information. "This is just the start of where these technologies are going. Students can learn to use these skills which businesses are using. There are a lot of medical podcasts," he shared. He considers it important for students to be able to use this new technology as they move through their educational careers.

Reeves explained that each of the history classes were divided into six groups; each had a podcasting topic and time period to cover. Students had a list of information they needed to include and present.

As long as their podcasts covered the information and the time period, they could "do anything they wanted.... That [flexibility] was one of those big departure points from traditional instruc-

tion," Reeves said.

The students' approaches were innovative. One group presented its information in a, "Who wants to be a millionaire?" format, Reeves said, while another created a movie trailer. Reeves said the students learned their subject matter. "The process is more important than the product," he said.

After the podcasting lesson was complete, in late December, Ferrera gave a comprehensive test to determine how well the students, who had reviewed all the lesson podcasts, had learned the subject matter.

The instructors were impressed. Ninety percent of the students passed the test; at least 70 percent of the students got every question right, the teachers agreed.

Reeves said the pass rate "is rare. There are normally a couple of questions a high percentage of students will miss." However, 80 percent of the students answered most questions correctly, he said.

Junior Joycelyn Gyamerah of Gainesville considered the project a success. She said, "I enjoyed this project because we were able to express our own ideas and listen to the ideas that others in our groups had. It was interactive, and I like that."

Erika Gregory of Haymarket

laid her thoughts out plainly when she said, "It was so much fun we forgot we were learning."

That's great news for the instructors who were also thrilled the technology was "free. We didn't spend a dime on this," Reeves said. Reeves and Ferrera may add video podcasts to their innovative teaching approaches.

Ferrera said the audio podcasts were the "first step toward making" podcasts a regular course offering. Once students are more familiar with the medium, they can get even more creative, he said. "I think working with Keith as a team and the success on this project just goes to show that, whenever adults are working to-

gether on behalf of kids, good things happen and this project was one of those good things."

The students' podcasts are on Battlefield High School's Web page, battlefield.grouppfusion.net, under the "Class Pages." The offerings are linked under the "Changing America Podcast Series."

