Recording Lessons: Your Personal Podcast

We are a year into a global pandemic that has forced many of us to shift instructional material online, and very few of us have formal training in recording online lessons. The goal of this article is to provide some practical recommendations for what you can do in your office or at home to get the best quality out of your recordings. Think of it as creating your own podcast.

Picking Equipment

One of the first problems people face is selecting the right equipment. What you need is a microphone that can plug into your computer. Ideally, you want to avoid headsets because they will pick up unwanted noise from you. One of the more popular options has been the Yeti microphone from Blue because all it requires is a USB connection. It also comes with a headphone jack so you can listen to what you sound like as you record so you can know if you're picking up any unwanted noise. There are other brands and models out there, so do not be afraid to shop around and see what other folks are using.

There are additional options you can add to microphones, such as arms and pop filters, but a microphone that plugs into your computer without being attached to your head is a good place to start.

Picking Software

Next, you need to pick the right kind of software to record with. Odds are your university already has programs you can use. I would recommend using those because that means you should also get university IT support.

If you have multiple options, use what you are most comfortable with. I've recorded lessons in Zoom and Blackboard Collaborate before because I was already familiar with them. I'm currently using the Screen Recorder function in Canvas Studio. It hasn't been ideal for me, but it works well enough for my needs and integrates with the Canvas site.

Equipment and Software Settings

It gets trickier to make recommendations at this point because giving specific setting recommendations means knowing what equipment and software you have, but there are some key things to watch for before you record. If your microphone has different settings, make sure you select the appropriate option. For example, a Yeti microphone has three dials, one of which doesn't actually affect the recording. Check your instructions or search online to find what you need to set your equipment to.

You should also make sure your microphone is positioned correctly. A common mistake with a Yeti microphone is to talk to the top of the microphone when you should instead be talking to the front of the microphone. But how you use the microphone depends on what microphone you have, so make sure you look up your specific microphone to see how it should be positioned.

If your microphone allows you to plug in headphones, use them. This will allow you to hear any unwanted noises your microphone may be picking up.

As for software settings, a common problem is recording with the computer's onboard microphone instead of the external microphone you plugged in. When you go to record, always double check to make sure the software is picking up the correct microphone.

Where You Record
Where you record makes a difference for sound quality. First, consider what noises are going to be outside of the room you record in that your microphone could pick up. For something like heating and air conditioning, if they are too loud and you can turn them off temporarily, that allows you to avoid unwanted noise, but this isn't always feasible in an office setting. You also want to avoid having other people talking in the background, though circumstances may prevent you from being able to fully avoid that.

You should also consider what kind acoustics the room has. You want to avoid an echoey room because that can cause unwanted noise. Many folks have taken to recording in closets or creating pillow/cushion forts around their microphones to help at-home recording quality.

You are not going to be able to get an ideal recording scenario without having your own recording studio. Just try make the best of what your situation allows. Every little bit helps.

How to Talk
Talking into a microphone and talking to a classroom are very different things. You have likely had experiences of video conference meetings where it sounds like someone is shouting and someone else is whispering. To avoid doing this, you want to make sure your equipment is set up correctly, but you also need to make sure you are speaking comfortably.

It is a good idea to do test recordings to make sure your volume is ok. Set your computer's volume to how you would normally have it when you are on a video conference session. Your playback recording should sound fine without having to turn your volume up or down.

It is also not a bad idea to listen to podcasts and radio programs to see how the professionals talk. In the same way that many of us have a teaching voice that is not quite the same as our regular voice, you might pick up a recording voice that is a little bit different as well that makes you a little easier for your students to understand.

Minimizing Unwanted Noise

There is already a fair amount of information on avoiding unwanted noise, but these are some other small things to watch for. If your microphone sits on your desk, avoid touching the desk or anything on it as much as possible while recording. If you need to take a drink of water, try to pause your recording. If you cannot pause, then do not drink right in front of the microphone. Also be careful about the microphone picking up the sound of you breathing. You probably will not be able to avoid it entirely, but you want to minimize distractions.

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