

Sounds Like Old Time Radio

First course, First grading period, Week 1

Radio brought the world to homes in the 1920s — broadcasting music, sound effects and the spoken word. Housewives during the day and families at night were transported by adventurous tales and heroes, soap operas and comedy, westerns and variety shows, and news from around the globe. Radio became so popular by the late 1930's, eight of 10 adults owned a set.



Enduring Understanding

Radio prepared the path for electronic communication. Its technology allowed for the suspension of reality and influence on American culture.



Essential Questions

When did radio begin, who made it happen and what was broadcast? How did they create the sounds that came over the airwaves into homes?



Objectives and Outcome

- Students will have a context into which to place the development of radio.
- Students will be introduced to early radio programs.
- Students will be introduced to sound and its use to create the illusion of another place and time.
- Students will begin to develop an ear for sound.
- Students will be able to create a sound effect and record it.



Suggested Time

- Five days



Resources and Materials

- Box of items that might be used to create a sound effect
- Minidisc or other recorders
- Microphones

Clips from several radio classic dramas. The following sites have programs available:

- Museum of Broadcast Communication (www.museum.tv)
The A.C. Nielsen, Jr. Online Research Center and archives have 4,000 radio programs and oral histories of broadcast pioneers.
- "The Big Broadcast with Ed Walker" (www.wamu.org/programs/bb/)
Walker broadcasts programming from radio's golden age ('30s to '50s). Check the schedule for the week's shows on WAMU.

- Radio Days: A Sound Bite History (<http://www.otr.com/>)
A site to make discoveries, including Capt. Midnight, Terry & The Pirates in mp3 format.
- Old Time Radio (<http://www.old-time.com/>)
This site is a radio buff's paradise. If you have time, explore it.

Radio-Television Museum (301) 390-1020 in Bowie, Md.

Take a field trip: Shows of the era, authentic sound effects and how to create them, memorabilia. The museum has audio tapes of commercials and records of 100 sound effects.



Procedure

1. Have students close their eyes and pretend that they are seated around the family radio. Play an excerpt from one of the early broadcasts. What do they hear and what do they picture? Were the writers and performers able to grab their imaginations, suspend reality and take them into the world of Marshall Dillon, The Lone Ranger and The Shadow? This was the magic of radio.

2. Provide a brief introduction to the beginning of radio. “Pioneers and Legends of Radio” (Second course, First grading period) provides a lesson that focuses more on the individuals and early radio stations. Although in this lesson we are suggesting that you provide a quick introduction to the first programming, its main purpose is to focus on the creation of sound effects and the illusion of reality. In this first week of radio production, let students have a hands-on experience, tease their imagination and introduce them to the basic equipment and radio industry they will learn in more detail during the radio course of study.

A quick introduction might include: What invention/discovery enabled the creation of radio sets? Who began radio broadcasts? Was there competition or a monopoly? Are any of the early companies still in existence? [Hint: The National Broadcasting Company was formed in 1926 and Columbia Broadcasting System in 1927.] What were the first programs on radio? Who was the audience? How did radio go from being a toy to its first nationwide hookup in 1927? Why the Rose Bowl game? Was radio only intended for the wealthy or the general public?

3. Put radio into the context of daily life of the late 1920s through the early 1950s. What was happening in the world and the U.S.? What other inventions were introduced? You might have a timeline of events, inventions, radio programs and personalities.

If your students have access to the Internet and you have time, they could do Web searches for the radio programs, commentators and personalities. Divide the class into three or four decade groups.

4. Share a clip from another classic radio show — *Blondie*, *The Shadow* or *Gunsmoke*. Have students listen and record sounds they hear: a horse moving across the landscape, a cowboy's spurs jingling and the door opening, a dog howling in the distance.

After collecting a list of sounds heard, discuss how radio takes its listeners to another place and time. Although you could discuss music and the vocal quality of each performer, focus on sound effects.

What function did sound effects serve?

- Set the scene (a closet, a saloon, or a schoolroom)
- Help create the mood (snow and rain storms or winds across a lonely landscape, a family happily gathered around the dinner table)
- Advance the action

5. How was the effect created? Listen to another clip from a classic. What sounds are heard other than music and humans speaking? How was the sound created? Was a horse or dog recorded? Very unlikely.

The sound of gunshots were usually created with a dowel hitting a leather hassock, a drumstick striking a drum or one board slapping against another. Metal sheets became thunder.

6. Bring to class a box with potential tools to create sound effects. These might include: aluminum foil, cellophane and wax paper, sand paper, several blocks of wood, bag of sand, box of corn starch, drum stick and drum, straws, a glass and several combs.

Divide students into groups of four. Students will be asked to create and record sounds to convey a contemporary scene or recreate (as close as they can) the sounds in a classic segment. They need to have four sound effects. They are to create and record their own sound effects using materials in the box and their backpacks and purses. They need to “label” or have a two- to three-sentence lead into the sound effect when they record it.

In case some groups need a little help, here are a few ways that early sound effects were created: twisting cellophane (crackling fire), squeezing a box of corn starch (footsteps in snow), blowing through a straw into water (boiling water), rubbing dueling foils together (skating on ice), squeezing folded sandpaper (breaking eggs), running a finger nail along the edge of a comb (crickets) and snapping open an umbrella (sudden ignition of fire). You might even give each group a sheet of sandpaper. See which one can come closest to recreating and recording the sound of breaking eggs.

This activity will introduce students to early technology, to common devices used to create the illusion of reality and to recorders and microphones. They will learn what items sound like when recorded. They will experiment with placement of the microphone in relation to the object.



Homework

For homework, ask students to interview 10 or more people who are their parent’s age or older. Informally, ask the following questions and record the answers: Do you remember older relatives or acquaintances of the family listening to radio? Did you listen to radio when you were a child or teenager? What programs do you recall others or yourself listening to? Can you relate an anecdote or a scene in which radio plays a part?

This suggestion is probably too ambitious for the first week of school, but if the teacher favors long-term projects or an extra project to get an A in the course, this could be assigned at the end of the first week to be completed by the end of the first grading period. Do a Web search for information about the early years of radio: programs — type of shows and when they first aired, time of day broadcast and duration; stars and personalities; news commentators and big events heard over the radio. Also, include inventions, historic events, and music of the time period. Students could be divided into the '20s, '30s, '40s and '50s. (Some of the second and third days of class could be given to their pooling information and preparing their decade timelines.)

Have students listen to radio that targets youth and is produced by youth. This homework finishes the arc: radio, then; radio, now. It also introduces students to work that may serve as a model and goal for them. Three youth radio programs are suggested. Go to their Web sites to learn about their programs and webcasts:

- Youth Radio (www.youthradio.org) is based in Berkeley, Calif. Youth Radio DC is based out of Latin American Youth Center's Art and Media House and can be heard on WTOP 820 AM and WTOP 104.3 FM. Youth Radio DC commentaries air hourly starting at 4:53 p.m.
- Radio Rookies (www.wnyc.org/radiorookies) is a "New York Public Radio initiative that provides teenagers with the tools and training to create radio stories about themselves, their communities and their world."
- Youth Voices ([www.wamu.org/youth voices](http://www.wamu.org/youth%20voices)). Students from D.C.'s Woodrow Wilson H.S. are trained at WAMU to produce a "radio feature story about an issue that affects their lives and the larger community in which they live." Current and archived stories are available.

Have students keep a journal of their impressions of the programming. What did they like? What was not appealing?



Assessment

Give groups credit for the inventiveness of their sound effects. The purpose of this assignment is to give some respect for Old Time Radio's use of early technology, to introduce them to sound effects and to develop their sensitivity to sound. It will also prepare them for more instruction in microphones and minidisks. Let them enjoy their early radio experiences.

If time allows you to do the Internet search, assess students on the number of items they found in each category, their sources and their oral presentations of the timeline that their group created. This is early in the class. This project will help students get acquainted and begin collaborating. It will also establish the need to do research and to find reliable sources.

If you wish to offer students an extra credit opportunity later in the year, return to Old Time Radio. Go to the Washington Post Newspaper In Education Web site (www.washpost.com/nie) and download "D.C. Renaissance," Volume 3, issue 7. On page 17 of the curriculum guide, photocopy "Radio—All the Rage" and give to students.



Academic Content Standards

Explain how voice, narrator, and point of view affect tone, characterization, plot and credibility. (DCPS English Language Arts, 10.LT.5)

Recognize how visual and sound techniques or design (such as special effects, camera angles, and music) carry or influence messages in various media. (DCPS English Language Arts, 11.M.3)

Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works. (Standard 1, NCTE/IRA Standards for the English Language Arts)

National Benchmark

Know skills used in electronic communications (e.g., producing audio recordings and broadcasts, producing video recordings and motion pictures). (McREL, Arts & Communication Career, Grades 9-12)



Industry Standards and Expectations

Examine equipment and its function. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Demonstrate knowledge and understanding of technical support related to broadcasting, States' Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)