

Ambience Matters

Second course, First grading period, Weeks 1-2

Just as the first course of radio production began with a focus on sound, this second course asks students to tune their ears up to the world around them and to the noises that are everywhere. Set aside scripts, actualities and interviews — listen to and use ambience.

We see and *hear* in pictures. Think of ambience as a three-dimensional audio layer.



Enduring Understanding

Nothing happens in a vacuum. Beneath those actualities is the all-encompassing world of sound. Radio is more than a mono-image of voices telling a story. It is the layers of everything we take for granted; the underlying sound that grounds us in where we are and conveys more than words do. Ambience is the color of the radio picture.



Essential Questions

How does one use ambience to carry a story forward? How does ambience tell the story in a way that goes beyond words?



Objectives and Outcome

- Students will learn to listen for ambience, to understand its importance, to plan for it as they gather their audio in the field.
- Students will understand how ambience is a vital part of a production piece in its content, pacing, timing, and ability to add significant understanding to the subject at hand.



Suggested Time

Two weeks



Resources and Materials

Radio Diaries (<http://radiodiaries.org/>)

Transom (www.transom.org)

Third Coast International Audio Festival (www.thirdcoastfestival.org/index.asp), WBEZ in Chicago

A Journey to the Edge of the Amazon (www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5424281), a NPR National Geographic Radio Expedition piece (listen to the jungle, recordings of oropendola call and birds in the tree canopy)



Procedure

1. Almost every story has the opportunity for ambience that can be used to carry the story forward — ambience that can enhance our understanding of a subject. As we live our daily lives, we have sounds that always surround us, some noticed, others never really noticed because they have become so much a part of the flow of life.

Have students listen to one or two pieces from the links listed above. Teachers should pre-select what will be played for the class. Have students list the ambience as they hear it as each story plays. Discuss the sounds and what they added to the story.

2. Listen to at least three stories and discuss the ambience in each:
- How long did the ambience ride under the actualities (acts) and voice tracks (trax) of the piece?
 - Did it stand on its own in the clear?
 - What did it add in meaning?
 - What did ambience add to the feeling and pacing of the piece?

As students discuss what they heard and wrote on the list, play the story again. Stop and start as needed. Analyze the use of ambient sound. Tune up their ears and get excited about the possibilities.

3. Review the use of good microphone handling techniques. You want to get across three main concepts:
- You cannot have microphone handling noise in the field. Do not move your hands along the mic stem. Wear headphones at all times to monitor for all noise including mic handling noise.
 - You have to have the right record level. If you have ambience set too low, when you raise the sound, you raise everything. Ambience will continue to compete with actualities and the reporter's words.
 - Get enough ambience that matches everything else you are recording so your productions will be seamless when they are mixed.
4. Students should be grouped in pairs. Each pair must bring back recordings of 10 sounds. Choose areas around the school — the reception area, a biology lab, a locker room, the school kitchen, the bus loading zone or car pool line. The sounds they collect are grouped into two categories:
- Students must come back with six of these seven distinct ambient sounds: a car horn, a bus door closing, water pouring in a sink, a Bunsen burner being lit, a phone ringing, school announcements, and a door closing.

They must also come back with :30 of room tone (Amb bed), even enough in level and bland enough to be looped or copied to smooth out any transitions that might be needed underneath the other specific ambience they are collecting. For example, if the student gets the sound of the school bus door closing and the bus engine is not running on the bus, students MUST collect a bed of ambience that does NOT include the bus engine running. If students must ask the driver to turn off the engine to get this sound, then they should ask. If, for safety reasons, you are worried about students recording in a parking lot, have them sit on the bus as the students board to get the sounds they need.

- In addition to the six distinct ambient sounds and the ambience beds as needed, each student pair must come back with four sounds that are unique to the location they have selected. The grunting and breathing in a locker room as opposed to the sound of lockers in that room, the sound of the school receptionist answering the phone as opposed to just a phone ringing, the sound of a cook asking for more ingredients to be put in a recipe, as opposed to only the sound of a refrigerator door closing.

5. Each pair of students selects the best examples of what they have recorded. The next day each pair load the examples into the workstation and play them for the class.

Students must turn in a typed list of their sounds, noting where they recorded, length of each segment and a comment on why those particular sounds were recorded. Is the sound unique to the place where it was recorded? Or is it a general sound that might be heard in many places? Put all the sounds on a CD in tracks. Use the following format:

Recording List

ID of sound	Location recorded	Length	Comments
Bus door closes	Bus 410 in line	:03	General
Bus engine	On bus in line	:30	Amb bed
Driver says hi	On bus in line	:05	Unique

6. Send students out in pairs again or assign individually. If students are sent in pairs, choose different partners for the pairs. For this assignment, have them convey the passing of time from the beginning to the end of an event using only ambience. They must do this in three to no more than four minutes. Some examples:

- From the beginning of the school day until the end
- From the beginning of practice through the game/match/meet and then to locker room after the game/match/meet
- From awakening to arrival at school
- From arrival at home to washing dishes after the evening meal

7. Pairs should put the collection together in a 4- to 5-minute audio collage. In addition to turning in their assignment on a CD, pairs should comment in writing on the passage of time they have captured, how they got the sound story and any complications they faced in getting the audio.

8. The audio collages will be shared with their classmates. After each audio collage is shared, have classmates write down what they believe is conveyed through the sound.

9. For their third assignment, students should be assigned to find 10-15 sounds to illustrate one word or concept. If equipment will allow it, individuals, not teams, should complete this assignment. Students cannot use recorded music, only music that exists in the area being recorded (examples music on a car radio, Muzak in an office building or the band practicing). Students should capture ambience, but do not write and record a narrative.

The words students can choose to sound illustrate are:

- Boredom
- Cold
- Friendship
- Heat
- Mailboxes
- Porches

10. Students should mix their collected sound in the workstation and save on a CD. Although the piece should stand on its own, have students write about their selection of a concept/word, the process of gathering it, the tone they are conveying and mood they hope results.

Through these three advanced exercises in gathering and using ambience, students should get a sense of the enduring power of high quality audio in an “acts-n-trax” age.



Homework

After the first class period, have students make a list of 20 distinctive sounds. These might include:

- The sound of the call to prayer at a mosque.
- A fountain on a sweltering day
- A note on a piano played over and over in practice
- A sniffle
- Chalk moving across a chalkboard

Listen every night to the ambience used in two to five radio pieces. Do not listen for content or actualities. Focus on the use of ambience. Come to class prepared to discuss the role of ambience in the pieces:

- Why is that ambience there? What purpose does it serve?
- Continuous? Fade out? Cross with another piece of ambience?
- How would the piece sound without the ambience?
- What idea is conveyed to the listener by the ambience? What piece of information would be missing without it?

Throughout the year be sure to analyze ambience and discuss what ambience students should be collecting to flesh out future assignments with the meaning, sensitivity, and understanding that only ambience can bring to their work.



Assessment

The pairs can be graded on all their recordings.

The last recording should receive the most scrutiny for microphone handling, recording quality, editing and mixing.



Academic Content Standards

National

Understand the principles, processes, and products associated with arts and communication media (McREL, Standard 1, Arts & Communication Career)

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

Apply knowledge of equipment and skills related to audio production. (Pathway KS Statement: Audio and Video Technology and Film, States' Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

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)

Apply knowledge of audio equipment for productions, including basic recording equipment, equalizers, mixing consoles, and quality-monitoring equipment. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Apply Knowledge of equipment and skills related to audio production, States' Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

Comprehend the types of microphones, pick-up patterns, and techniques required for a variety of audio presentations. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Apply Knowledge of equipment and skills related to audio production, States' Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)