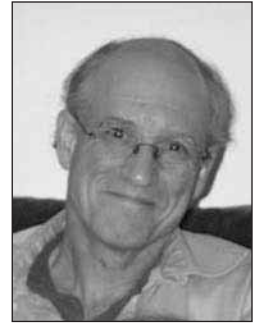


The Living Lit Mag

By Jeff Deitchman, T-C '99, jeff.deitchman@verizon.net



“In the deafening darkness...,” Na’ama read, in a voice that belied her age. I wanted to hold those words, in that voice. Did she know she’d written a phrase so beautiful and rare? Did she hear her own voice? I did. I used to think it a pity that, along with the work they’d created in my class, I couldn’t lovingly shove my students themselves into my file cabinets. A mini-grant from MWP, bless their hearts, helped me do something close, and it helped my students get a handle on the most elusive but most important intangible in writing: voice.

Instead of producing a paper lit mag this year, our Creative Writing Club made a CD: a living lit mag. Perhaps the greatest joy in writing with students is in hearing them read their work; and students who have just written what is invariably their best piece *ever*, are dying to read it aloud, as only they can. The idea was too simple to boast of. I almost forgot, we have *ways* to preserve the spoken word, they’re inexpensive, and most schools own them.

I won’t say this project was a snap. It took time and a good bit of practice with the gizmos to produce a high-quality, fluid product. It was worth every moment, though. And it certainly took no more time than it takes to produce a paper mag. I can describe the process in four stages: recording, editing, assembly and reproduction.

Recording

What you’ll need:

- a good microphone, pop screen and mic stand
- a quiet place to record
- a recording device
- a set of headphones

Ask me for a copy of our CD, play the first couple of minutes from it for your students, and my guess is they’ll fight to be first to record.

Editing and Assembly

- a computer-based audio editing program (they’re free)
- headphones
- playback equipment: an amplifier and speakers
- a CD burner (many computers have these built in)

For each piece you’ve recorded, you’ll first transfer the sound from your recorder to your editing program. Then, you’ll edit out any verbal stumbles, background annoyances, overlong pauses...If you wish, you may add effects, music or sounds before, after or “under” a piece. After recording and editing each piece, you’ll arrange them in a pleasing sequence and drop transitional sounds or music between pieces (watching out for copyright problems). Last, you’ll burn a master CD.

Reproduction

- a high-speed CD burner
- blank CDs
- jewel cases for CDs
- a CD label maker and blank labels
- a photocopier to copy CD inserts

The rest is nuts and bolts. I figured I’d need about 100 copies, and I was happy to learn that we have a high-speed CD burner. It makes seven copies at a time. Our first 100 copies sold quickly. We charged \$2 apiece for them—more than they cost us to make; I was more eager to get them into circulation than to make money, though. Even at that price, we’ll come out ahead. You might find a commercial CD reproduction company to do this work for you, but the little research I did into it indicated it might be too expensive—especially if they do all the printing as well. I can’t say I did much looking, so you might find a reasonable duplicating service. Of course, if you’ve got a brother-in-law in the business...Any of your students will know how to design and print out CD labels and inserts, and any office supply store will have the blanks. These can get a little “clip art-ish,” so if your art department isn’t doing anything important, you might...You’re a teacher; you know how to implore.

I mentioned nuts and bolts. Here are a few:

Microphone: The two big points to consider here are the mic’s fidelity and its propensity to “pop.” In the old days, you had to spend hundreds, sometimes thousands, to get a good-sounding mic. No longer true. My radio production students use mics that cost \$20 apiece, and they sound just fine. These mics even, to a degree, resist popping—that an-



Jeff Deitchman's students participating in the living lit magazine at Sherwood High School.

noying assault on the ears that results from pronouncing a *p* or other plosives too loudly or too close to the mic. Pros know how to “work a mic” to avoid popping; students are more apt to treat a mic like some of their MTV idols do, appearing more as if they’re going to get intimate with it than sing into it. Even the kids who are mic-shy don’t know how to avoid pops. So the pop consideration is important. Your school probably owns a good enough mic, but probably not a pop screen. These little rings, 4-5” in diameter, do work. They’re covered in what the manufacturers claim is space-age, sound-diffusing mesh. It looks to me like discarded women’s nylons. Good ones cost about \$50. A pop screen coupled with one of the mics your school owns might get you there. We wanted our own mic, mainly to avoid having to schedule around others who need it.

Even though you can get mics that sound just fine for very little, they are like everything else: you (sometimes) get what you pay for. “Just fine” is not as good as “broadcast quality.” Keep in mind that the better the sound, the more impressed your students will be with their own voice. You’ll be defeating your purpose, and perhaps something much bigger, if you make your writers sound bad. With our MWP minigrant, we bought an amazing Neumann. Any studio in the country would find it most acceptable. It’s especially forgiving in the pop department, and with

the pop screen, it’s even more so. BSW (www.bswusa.com) has the best prices anywhere on audio gear, they’ve got school pricing, and they’re nice. When’s the last time you spoke over the phone to a nice person, even when you were trying to give that person your money?

Recording Device: We used a portable minidisc recorder, set for the highest-quality recording. These make excellent recordings—especially given what you’re asking them to do. They’re also small, reliable, very inexpensive, and tolerant toward klutzes. Any type of good recorder will do, though. Some folks still swear by tape decks. But you’ve got to spend *many* hundreds to get a tape deck that will sound as good as a \$150-\$200 minidisc recorder. And loading analog sound to your computer for digital editing can get complex. You don’t want to get into analog tape editing: Here kids, take this razor blade and...

Where to Record: You don’t need a sound studio, and if you’ve got one, you might decide against using it. Studios can be intimidating, and some of your students will be mic-shy. A room with carpet, some draperies and cloth-covered furniture works fine. Just avoid rooms that have lots of hard surfaces and appliance noise (like kitchens), ambient noise, or heating and air conditioning blowers you can’t control during recording. Before investing a lot of time recording your students in an iffy room, put on

(continued on page 18)

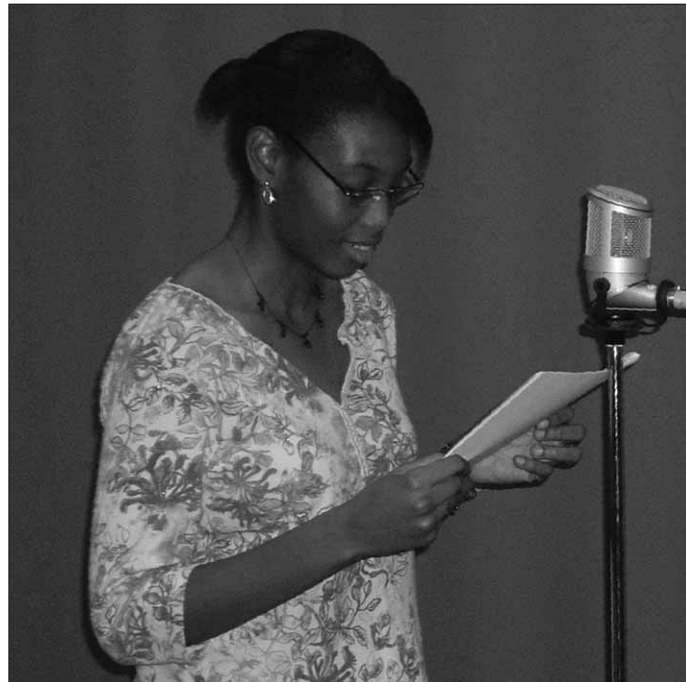
The Living Lit Mag

continued from page 17

your headphones and record yourself, and record a minute of silence. The headphones alone will usually tell you if you're getting too much ambient noise, but play yourself back if you're not sure. You'll find out if you'll be able to stand the background "silence" of that room. **Given reasonably good equipment, the ultimate quality of your recording is probably more dependent on *where* you record than on the cost of your gizmos.** You can get a quick idea of a room's potential by giving it the "clap test." Try clapping, but only once, and as loudly as you can. Then, listen for echo. If you hear the sound ringing, pinging, echoing, reverberating, your room is too "live." You'll sound as if you've recorded in a trash can—the tin kind. For vocal work, the "drier" the background the better. For special effects, you can always add echo, and you can control just how much; but it's hard to "dry it out" once it's on tape.

Audio Editing Software: Once you've got a piece recorded, you'll need to transfer it to an editing program. You can download a number of these, and mighty decent ones, for free. Garage Band and Audacity are among the best-known. Since this project is relatively simple, you don't need many of the features for which you must pay between \$200-400. We used Adobe Audition, which does cost about \$200, but only because I use it in my radio production classes. About 90 percent of the radio stations in the country use it. These programs are easy to use, if you're a kid. It took me a long time to learn.

Copyright: We decided to call our mag *Tales From the Midnight Train*. Long story. We needed some train sounds, of course. I found a CD for train buffs. Niche kind of thing. I wrote to the producer, and he not only gave us permission to use sounds from it, he asked for a copy of our finished product and he offered to come to our school to tell the kids all about the golden age of trains. Your school might even own a set of royalty-free sound effects tapes or CDs. My students tell me some are available, royalty-free, on the Web. We used some original music, too, which we also recorded ourselves. No infringement issues there. Plus, this is a great way to involve your music department and some of your school's home-grown bands or starving musicians. Remember: you're a teacher. Groveling becomes you.



Another student addresses the microphone in Jeff's class.

Headphones: During professional recording sessions, often both the recording technician *and* the artist wear headphones. That's fine for artists who have grown accustomed to hearing themselves, but it can be spooky for your less gung-ho-about-the-sound-of-my-voice students. You'll have a few of them. I decided I'd alone wear the headphones during recording. I wanted the most natural reading I could get, and it's hard enough to feel normal with a mic in your face. I might try letting the students wear phones too, though. It's pretty exciting once you get used to it, and the kids might find it adds to the fun. Recording techs *always* wear headphones: should the artist pop a *p*, or should an unwanted sound come through on the "tape," they ask the artist to repeat the problem section and insert it during editing. Also, during editing and assembly, you'll need to replay pieces a good number of times. This can get mighty tiresome if everyone around you must listen to the repetitions.

Playback equipment: Ultimately, you'll want to play the finished product at full volume for the whole group. I cannot imagine a universe in which this can be done without pizza. You'll also need some nice speakers and an amplifier to couple to your computer. Again, you've got this stuff

The Living Lit Mag

continued from page 18

already at school, but like us, you might want your own to use when *you've* got time. I got my amplifier from atop a neighbor's trash can. It works perfectly. I got my speakers at a yard sale for \$10. They are fine. I like to think of myself as resourceful, though I wonder if the folks on my block would use that term. The father of one of my students, however, is a big shot at Polk Audio. They make awfully, awfully good speakers. When he heard what we were doing, he donated some "near field" monitors—like they use in recording studios—and they are fabulous.

Again, the better the gear for this, the more motivating the experience for your students. When they hear themselves in high fidelity, the little green lights on the computer won't be the only ones glowing.

Immediately after our listening/pizza party in June—that very day—my students began recording pieces for next year's CD. We had a good jump on it well before we left for the summer.
