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Credit: Ian Roberts

Eerie music creeps into listeners' earbuds as an episode of *SciFi Friday* begins. A male voice introduces "the podcast where science fiction film meets real science" before the show's host and her expert guest, Cameron Hastie (an ape keeper at Salt Lake City's Hogle Zoo), take the mic. "A lot of people still think that apes are fairly violent," Hastie says, and she recounts how she often overhears zoo visitors describing a male gorilla's expression as mean and angry. "But it's just his normal face," she explains.

This particular episode of the radio-style talk show, available for free download from iTunes, originally followed a Utah public television broadcast of *The Ape Man*, a classic 1943 fright film. In her twelve-minute spiel, Hastie critiques the movie and talks about the real excitement -- and the drudgery -- that make up her typical workday.

SciFi Friday is the brainchild of Laura Hunter, director of instructional services for the [Utah Education Network](#) [1]. "I read some studies published by the director of our natural history museum that said pop culture is a good way to get young people interested in science," says Hunter. This led her to podcasting. In other installments of the series, a physicist uses the 1953 film *Atomic Blonde (Run for the Hills)* to discuss Cold War fears and fission bombs, and a research entomologist from a bee-biology and bee-systematics lab debunks the so-called science in *Wasp Woman*, from 1959.

Dozens of episodes later, it's clear that Hunter has stumbled on a winning formula. Children of all ages, who are more accustomed to the fantastical voyages of new media such as video games and DVDs than to old-school flicks, rave about the program. [The National Telecommunications Educational Association](#) [2], a consortium of public television licensees, honored the show in January 2008. And now educators and students worldwide can listen in.

SciFi Friday is among the many programs available free from [iTunes U](#), [3] a new section of Apple's iTunes Store, which offers downloads for MP3 players. The online repository, launched in July, contains everything from course curricula and professional-development tips to student-journalism podcasts and school announcements. [The State Educational Technology Directors Association](#) [4], a national

organization that promotes leadership in technology to support lifelong learning, and several state education agencies have provided Apple with the K-12 content. So far, contributors in Arizona, California, Florida, Maine, Michigan, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Utah have uploaded materials to the site. ([Edutopia video](#) [5] is also available.)

"We believe high-quality content is available everywhere on the net, and iTunes U collects all of that in one interface," says Kathleen Webb, principal of [Utah's Electronic High School](#) [6] and educational-technology coordinator for the state's Department of Education. Webb, who contributes to the site and uses its resources, adds, "The thing that's exciting for us is that as others put high-quality content out there, it will be easier to integrate into our learning environment for our own students."

Webb says iTunes U helps teachers quickly identify materials they can use as references in their courses. For example, a chemistry teacher seeking resources on hydrogen can perform a search for the element using the iTunes Store's Power Search tool, and she can limit it to return only iTunes U results. She can then add the appropriate links to her course page and encourage students to download the audio to study. This feature will become increasingly useful as the content library grows. Meanwhile, early iTunes U K-12 users have already found a few more ways in which the content can bolster traditional learning.

Study Reviews

Brendan Murphy, the Advanced Placement calculus and statistics teacher at [John Bapst Memorial High School](#) [7], in Bangor, Maine, makes up to five videos a week in which he solves math problems or answers student questions. The brief videos are easy and inexpensive to produce; he uses a MacBook, an Apple iSight camera, and Apple QuickTime Pro software. He says the videos help students understand advanced topics, such as how to find the area under a curve using a calculator.

Murphy created the video podcasts as a part of Maine's [AP4All](#) [8] initiative, which brings AP courses via distance learning to students who otherwise wouldn't have access to them. But students in his regular classes started asking to see the podcasts, too. "This year, I'm going to do podcasts for the students I see every day," Murphy says. "What a great way to review for the test, and I never would have thought of that. It took the kids to ask, 'Why can't you do it for us as well?'"

Because the videos are available on iTunes U, other teachers can see how he presents his course materials, and other calculus students can use them to review or learn the material.

School Announcements

Two decades ago, the [Fox Chapel Area School District](#) [9], in Pennsylvania, helped transform traditional, staid morning announcements into broadcast-journalism productions. Today, teleprompters, computer-controlled lighting, sophisticated graphics, and digital recording take the shows even further away from their dull intercom forebears. Now, iTunes U is introducing new audiences to Fox Chapel's six- to twelve-minute segments, in which K-12 students tackle topics as diverse as the weather, congressional politics, and student activities from behind a news-style anchor desk.

Norton Gusky, coordinator of educational technology for the district, has watched the program evolve over the past eighteen years. He says current students have a broad perspective on news, and they have an affinity for technology that leads to a high level of professionalism in every aspect of production, from the on-air talent to the camera operators. "Ten years ago, the kids may not have thought as much about things outside of their region," he says. "Today they are thinking, reacting, and sharing with their

community."

Social and Emotional Learning

Utah Electronic High School's iTunes U content focuses on the whole student, going beyond strictly academic topics, and seeks to engage parents. For example, a video by the Utah State Office of Education's Comprehensive Counseling and Guidance Program teaches students how to cope with bullying, and the state's Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control posted commercials from ParentsEmpowered.org [10].

The commercials educate parents about the brain damage and other potential ill effects of underage drinking and offer advice on how to speak to children. The goal of the commercials is to "give parents permission to set clear rules, to monitor their kids, and to bond with them," says Doug Murakami, the agency's alcohol-education director.

The "Stay in Contact" TV spot features an underage-drinking session disrupted by a distant mom jerking the bottle out of her son's hand with the help of a comically long string. Robin Taylor, prevention coordinator for the Northeastern Counseling Center, in Vernal, Utah, says parents have received the lighthearted ads well. "It's a fun campaign. It's not pointing fingers at people," Taylor notes of the initiative, which includes radio ads, billboards, vehicle wraps, and even town hall meetings. "They can give the information in a different way, and it wouldn't be as productive. The way they are going about it has been successful in our area."

Professional Development

Michigan's MI Learning portal offers *Free Is Good*, a series of podcasts by [Frank Miracola](#) [11], an interactive-learning consultant who highlights programs, Web sites, and shortcuts available to busy teachers. His videos offer step-by-step instructions for a range of tech topics, from creating a Web site to using Internet radio to stream music in the classroom.

"People always ask me, 'How did you do that?' I take them to Frank's posts," says Mardy McGaw about the video tutorials. McGaw, the [Classrooms for the Future](#) [12] coach for the Conestoga Valley School District, in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, runs a site called [Info Librarian](#) [13]. It's hosted by Weebly, one of the services Miracola has explored on the *Free Is Good* podcast. (Classrooms for the Future is a \$20 million Pennsylvania initiative to equip high schools with the laptops and other technology resources needed to prepare students for our increasingly high tech world.)

[Russ Barneveld](#) [14], a forty-year teaching veteran, says Miracola's tutorials help him keep up with computer technology. "The *Free Is Good* podcast has really gotten us into using a lot of the Web 2.0 applications that are free, don't require downloads, and promote collaboration," says the affiliate professor in the College of Education at Grand Valley State University, in Grand Rapids, Michigan. "With the financial situation schools are in today, the free applications are great."

Student Teaching

And it's not just adults who are driving educational technology. Mike Boylan, a senior at Fox Chapel Area High School, cohosts after-school workshops to help teachers learn how to use Apple's iWork suite, which includes Keynote, Pages, and Numbers presentation software and other tools. "We students have grown up in the digital era," he explains. "We know so much about communications and

technology that it seems natural for us to teach it."

Boylan says he's excited to share his Keynote tutorials through iTunes U because experience has taught him that technology makes classrooms more engaging and effective. "I love it," he says of the opportunity to educate teachers in Pennsylvania and beyond. "It's really important that teachers incorporate twenty-first-century skills into their lessons, and for me to be able to assist them is quite an honor."

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