but just listen
Abstract

“But Just Listen” is a website that explores the way stories of young voices can be told through conversations with an adult, particularly showcasing the student-teacher relationship. I created “But Just Listen” as a way for students of the Baltimore City Public Schools System (BCPSS) to express their views, opinions, and frustrations in a safe space. Not only does this platform act as a catharsis for the students, but it gives people of different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds than the students they work with the opportunity to listen to what they really think and experience.
Introduction

With the recent Baltimore riots leaving the citizens of its city shaken, a lot of people blamed the city’s youth. As a fifth-year high school teacher at the closing Friendship Academy of Engineering and Technology and previously at the Historic Frederick Douglass High School, adjacent to Mondawmin Mall, ground zero for the Baltimore City 2015 riots, I noticed that a lot of frustrations arose. Many of my students feel as though the media portrayed them in negative light. Many were angry that they were made to look like the perpetrators of the riots. And many were heartbroken at the state of their city. As a teacher and growing up in a different class setting than my students, it was hard for me to speak for my students, as well as defend them, from those who do not interact with them on a daily basis.

Teaching in Interactive Media Production for the Careers and Technology Program, many of my students have stories to tell. However, many of them don’t have an outlet for their voices. This thesis project is a website that will showcase auditory stories by students in Baltimore City. Every few weeks will feature a story by a Baltimore City Student.

Background

On April 27th, 2015, several students showed me social media posts about a Purge-like event in the mall across the street after school - a reference to the 2013 movie where crime is legal for 24 hours. In the days after the riots, the student received unwanted media attention. We saw images of young black kids in the
streets rioting Baltimore City. The media were quick to accuse Frederick Douglass High School students of participating in that riot due to the school’s proximity to the mall. It was then I decided to have a platform for the students to speak for themselves.

Research

Although there are many projects and resources for students to use as an outlet, my goal is more conversation based. The benefits of an audio-hosting website will allow the students to have their voice be heard. For students, having their voices heard through conversations with a teacher showcases the importance of a student-teacher relationship in trauma-filled schools. It also allows an audience from different demographics to see, listen, learn, and understand students from an urban city.

According to the Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health Initiative, nearly one third of children in Baltimore City have two or more Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). This roughly affects 43,500 children. On top of teaching, teachers also need to make their classroom safe and supportive environment for their students, especially to students who have ACE. When stress hormones flood the brain, it causes a number of negative effects on the student’s executive functions (Terrasi, Galarce). Because there is a direct correlation to trauma and academic development, instead of asking “what’s wrong with you?” teachers and adults should ask, “what happened to you?” (McInerney, McLindon).
In a time where public education is more standardized than ever, the time to build meaningful relationships between student and teacher is lost. These students’ voices need to be heard and many of them do not have opportunities to speak their mind. Teachers are capable of being sources of consistency and support for students who have experienced trauma. In order to do this, a skill mastered is empathetic listening. A teacher doesn’t need to solve the student problems, but he or she can listen and validate the student’s feelings. As a teacher, I can state that at times I have shut down a student when they had something to say, all for the sake of moving the curriculum forward. In an interview with Katherine Mullins, “[students] need their voices to be heard because they have important things to say and our current system is not set up that way.”

An important question to answer is, “how does this benefit the student and the listener?” As a teacher in BCPSS, we are graded on “knowing our students.” However, this only applies to their academic growth with data tracking their progress throughout the school year. The BCPSS instructional framework rubric is designed to identify teachers who are ineffective, developing, effective, or highly effective as teachers in the classroom. One particular indicator is Plan 1: Know your students. This doesn’t serve all the needs of our students. In my career as a teacher, I found myself humbled by what my students go through. I would hear stories of my students being stopped by a police officer because they were running to school, forced to sit on the curb for 40 minutes, and miss a Statewide exam. I would also hear about my students who had someone in their family die due to gun violence. In
my first three years of teaching, we lost a student every year due to gun violence. We know, this is not normal. But as much horror as my students go through on a daily basis, they are not fazed by it. This is their norm. This is their reality. Upon learning these things about my students, I realized that my role as a teacher played a bigger part in their lives. My role as a teacher extends beyond what I teach in the classroom. I become a mentor, cheerleader, therapist, and friend. Mullins continues, “it gives you (the teacher) the perspective of the student in your class. Having this perspective changes the way you interact with that student.” In my student growth data, I couldn’t include that a student was going through something traumatic. However, as a teacher, I can show more compassion towards my students and give them more opportunities to succeed.

To a casual listener, listening to these conversations is a way of sending ideas from one person to another. This is a way to help listeners make sense of what the student is going through. Listening can provide the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of the student’s experiences and oneself. For the student, it provides release of built up feelings and allows them to be more comfortable in the classroom. If teachers can build these relationships at the start, they will be better at handling conflict when it comes up, on both sides- students will more likely seek assistance from the teacher and the teacher will be more likely to listen. (Mullins).”
Discovery

During the exploration process to find outlets for conversations and storytelling, podcasts were a great outlet available for consumption. According to Convince & Convert and Edison Research, here are some of the most critical statistics on Podcasts of 2017:

- 112 million Americans have listened to a podcast, up 11% in one year.
- 52 percent of podcasts are listened to at home, 18 percent in the car.
- 67 million Americans listen to podcasts monthly.
- 42 million Americans listen to podcasts weekly.
- 112 million Americans have listened to a podcast.

In the same study, it was noted that a larger percentage of 25 to 54-year-olds listen to podcasts monthly than any other age group, which contains the average age of public school teachers, which is 42.4 years old. As the audience numbers increase each year, it can be determined that podcasts are a growing in audience and most importantly, people are listening.

Podcasting was first known as “audio-blogging,” which can be traced back to as early as the 1980s. With the innovative creation of the Apple iPod, users were able to download Internet radio “on-demand.” According to LearningTimes.com, some benefits of podcasting include production cost, time efficiency, and portability. These were factors in helping me decide to do audio podcasts.

In researching the best platform to showcase various stories, WordPress was the best to host the audio files in a blog-format style. WordPress does a great job in
separating code from content and design. In the future, my plans to have teachers or school employees submit their own conversations with their students in order to have a better streamlined process.

I built this website and podcast format from the inspiration of story sites like StoryCorps and Humans of New York. Audio was chosen as a media outlet rather than have accompanying visuals for two main reasons: First is that I did not want the audience to focus on what these kids look like. And second, I also did not want the student to focus on what they look like. With audio, the student could freely speak without the worry of being judged. However, this is still an online presence there was still a need to have visuals. One or two still photos of the student will accompany their podcast episode.

Upon starting this project, I gathered what materials I had to create a cost-efficient process: I have access to an audio recording studio as well as a Blue Microphones Nessie Adaptive USB Condenser Cardioid Microphone. I also have access to web building and audio editing software.

**Audience**

The primary audiences for this project are school employees of different ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds than the students they work with who are willing to listen to stories of the young people of Baltimore City. My initial audience will be teachers around the Baltimore City Area. This audience will be asked to think of students they have a good relationship with and think about recording their conversations with them. The audience demographic will build into that teacher's
persona, social, and professional network so that people can hear how students are willing to open themselves to teachers.

The secondary audience is the students themselves. By the time teachers receive them as high school students, a majority of them already have a distrust in adults in authority. The goal is to show the students that there are adults out there that do care for them academically and personally.

An audience goal for this project will be middle-aged adults (ages 36 - 55 years), and older adults (aged older than 55 years). Now more than ever, adults in the middle-age and older adults age groups are dismissing young voices as “ignorant, arrogant, full of [them]selves and plain old stupid.” Isabel Song writes, “When adults forget to care about the future generation and forget not only to listen to them but to nurture their dreams and their amazing minds, they miss out on possible solutions to local and global issues. They miss out on questions that would otherwise change the way they view the world. They miss out on the opportunity to really learn what teens think and worry about, and they miss the chance to influence the future for the better. They miss out on an intriguing conversation. A learning experience is lost, for both the adult and the teen.”

See Appendix A for Research and Data
Limitations

With any project that involves high school students, there is bound to be bumps and/or dead ends along the way. While I planned ahead of time to keep those things from happening and stick to my set schedule as best as possible, new unforeseeable difficulties arose. One major limitation was trying to set an audio recording on a student’s schedule. When I asked students to participate in this project, oftentimes they did not pull through. When they did approach me, I was unable to set up an ideal recording space to make the student feel comfortable. Another set of problem problems I had were the technical problems that go along with recording and editing. Especially recording during a school day or during class time. While the students were comfortable, the microphone picked up finger taps, drumming, whistling, thumping, and other various sounds.

One last anticipated problem I came across was balancing the teacher workload. As a teacher will little to no formal classroom training, many of my responsibilities were learned as I went along. Being a high school teacher is highly demanding and stressful.

Timeline

September 2015: Organize thesis committee and select chair

September 2015 – October 2016: Write Proposal

November 2016 – Submit first-draft proposal to thesis committee

Late November 2016 – Proposal approved

November 2016 – January 2017: Interview students
January 2017 – January 2018: Build website and edit interviews/Write paper

Design

The branding of “...but just listen” will convey the idea of minimalism and simplicity. The logo is designed with inspiration from the Humans of New York and Black Lives Matter Logo. The wordmark logo is designed with the web safe Open Sans Typeface (created by Steve Matteson). The website utilizes Open Sans and uses web safe font Indie Flower for the pull quotes. The ellipses, “when placed at the beginning or end of a sentence, the ellipsis can also inspire a feeling of melancholy or longing.” The ellipses are also meant to convey that this phrase is said at the end of a sentence as a request. The word “Listen” is highlighted for emphasis to the word and the action. The website’s color scheme was originally a simple black, white, and gray palette. I initially did not want to focus and give too much emphasis on design since the primary deliverable is an audio piece. However, since websites are primarily a visual medium, I decided to add shades of blue to give an inviting and calm feeling to users.

See Appendix B for Design.

Website

The website has four pages. The Front/Home Page is the most visual with rotating jumbotron plugin to feature, episodes, latest news, and links. Below the fold, a responsive grid holds the episodes and will update with the most recent episode. The About Page has
a quick introduction to the purpose of the website. The Posts Page is titled Stories and features a list the episodes. There are featured pull-quotes to grab the user’s attention. In an individual post page, copy accompanies the post to give the user some background information on the student from the teacher’s perspective. I also put a contacts page in hopes educators who discover the website will want to submit their own story.

See Appendix B for Website Screenshots.

Methodologies

Adobe Audition was utilized for digital audio editing and it was learned for the purposes for this project. That also took time to learn. A variety of hardware was used to record the conversations. From a MacBook Pro, an iPhone, a Nessie Microphone, and to a zoom recorder.

For setting up the interview and for creating a safe comfortable space for my students, I started by asking them what they had for breakfast. During a master class with The Kitchen Sisters, this was a method of getting the subjects they were recording to relax while the audio levels were being set up. I used this technique and then followed up with other questions based on their answer to get a conversation going.

For creating the WordPress website, Adobe Dreamweaver was utilized for its split window workspace to see HTML and CSS changes in real-time. Adobe Dreamweaver also locates tags between the HTML and CSS files to assist in
troubleshooting. A Responsive Bootstrap Template was used to create the website. When transferring over the WordPress, through trial and error, I copy and pasted the code created in Dreamweaver into the PHP Templates. Utilizing forums and help websites, I was able to create a responsive website for “but just listen.” A reason for the responsive website design was so that users could access the website on their phone.

Along with Adobe Audition and Adobe Dreamweaver, Adobe Photoshop was used to create the different versions of logos. Adobe products were used because I already had access to the subscription-based plan and it was also available in the schools I worked in.

Upon coming across audio interferences, many sounds were included in the final cut as they portrayed a “realness” quality to the environment. The students would use their hands to speak and some would pound the desk the recording device was on to emphasize their point.

See Appendix D for Release Forms

**Feedback**

In gathering informal student feedback from those who participated, students felt that this project was important. Student Brandon Thompson stated that he felt like a weight was lifted off his shoulders after [the] conversation and that there were things on his mind that he just needed to say out loud. Student Jakia Cornish said that she needed [to have the conversation]. She said there are some
things that she couldn’t tell someone like her mother, but she feels comfortable doing that [in the classroom].

In gathering informal teacher feedback from teachers who explored the website, Kathryn Engwall, a first-year English teacher wrote, “After discussing your work with you, exploring your website, and listening to several of your students’ stories online I have found that during my recent conversations with my students I keep thinking back to what you’ve said about just listening. Oftentimes, when my students share personal stories or struggles, I immediately want to offer my advice or point out what they need to change, but lately I’ve found myself simply listening, which has allowed me to interact with my students in a more positive and effective manner in an academic context. I have had several students share some personal stories, and now when I see them struggling in class -- or doing really well, I have a new appreciation for and understanding of who they are and what they have experienced. I find that I am more patient and willing to accommodate my students’ needs, while also continuously pushing them to reach their potential.”

Sixth-year teacher Amanda Platt, wrote, “I really like how you get the students voice and perspective. It is so important to understand them and get to know them as students on a deeper level.”

**Future Steps**

While this website and its posts are advertised as podcast episodes, they have yet to be released to public outlets, such as iTunes and Stitcher. Phase 2 is where the iTunes or Stitcher release would happen and will also cut up the audio for
the website into snippets. While the user will still be able to access the full episode in iTunes or Stitcher, a user can preview different clips of the conversation on the website. Phase 2 will also have social media pages like Facebook and Twitter.

During the final phase, Phase 3 will be the conversations transcribed for the hard of hearing audience. At this point, the website should have an efficient and streamlined process of posting conversations. Phase 3 will also include other teachers and their students’ conversations and will also grow into a community where teachers can get different insight on how they interact with their students, as well as allow for a continued dialogue that includes students and teachers of all different backgrounds.
Appendix A – Research & Data

Baltimore City Public School Student Demographic (2017)

- African American
- Hispanic/Latino
- White
- Other

*Figure 1 Baltimore City Public Schools Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLAN 1. Know your students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>P1 KEY CONCEPTS</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Determination of current student performance levels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional plans that account for student characteristics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 2 - BCPSS Instructional Framework & Rubric: P1*
Figure 3 - Edison Research Podcast Statistics of 2017
Appendix B - Design

Figure 4 - Humans of New York Logo

Figure 5 - Black Lives Matter Logo

Figure 6 - But Just Listen Logo
Figure 7 - But Just Listen Fonts

Open Sans
Open Sans
Open Sans

Figure 8 - But Just Listen Color Palette
Appendix C – Website

Figure 9 - Home Page: Jumbotron

Figure 10 - Homepage: Jumbotron

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Figure 11 - Home Page: Jumbotron

Figure 12 - Home Page: Below the Fold and Footer
About

The ...but just listen Story

...but just listen’s mission is to provide students with a safe space to share their stories with the world. Teaching in Baltimore City Schools opened my eyes to the challenges these kids face daily. These challenges moved me to become their advocate, coming to their defense and aid while and when others criticized and demeaned them regularly. Having an outlet that allows and encourages my students, and students everywhere, to authentically speak for themselves will have far more impact than myself or others attempting to speak for them.

Figure 13 - About Page

Listen to: Maya, Jakia, & Brandon
Published on March 16, 2018

"As terrorists, we have a saying: ‘there’s nothing they don’t do. If you do it to someone else, then that’s OK.’ - Maya

"I want to get out of here. My dad’s saying he’s trying to get me out of Baltimore.” - Brandon

"That’s just the second time, you never know. I could have a gun and I could say ‘come here right now’, and you have no other choice but to go.” - Xavier

Listen to: Xavier
Published on March 13, 2018

"Life is hard. Everyone has their own problems in life. Life is hard. Some people just get better outcomes.”

Figure 14 - Stories/Post Page
Figure 15 - Stories/Post Page

Figure 16 - Individual Post Page
Figure 17 - Individual Post Page

Figure 18 - Individual Post Page
Appendix D – Release Forms

**RELEASE**

For good and valuable consideration, the receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, I hereby irrevocably consent to the inclusion of the student’s appearance in the website currently entitled “But Just Listen” produced by Katrina Castro ("Producer"). Producer, its successors, assigns, licensees, affiliates, agents, officers and employees, may without restriction utilize, distribute, broadcast, exhibit, modify, copy, create derivatives of and/or otherwise use the student’s appearance, name and likeness, in whole or in part, in any and all manner and media now known or hereafter devised, in all languages, in perpetuity.

I warrant and represent that I am the parent and/or legal guardian of the student, and that I am free to enter into this Release.

STUDENT NAME: ______________________

PARENT/GUARDIAN

Signature: __________________________
Print Name: _________________________
Address: ____________________________

Phone: _____________________________
Date: ______________________________
RELEASE

For good and valuable consideration, the receipt of which is hereby acknowledged, I hereby irrevocably consent to the inclusion of ________________’s appearance in the website currently entitled “But Just Listen” produced by Katrina Castro (“Producer”). Producer, its successors, assigns, licensees, affiliates, agents, officers and employees, may without restriction utilize, distribute, broadcast, exhibit, modify, copy, create derivatives of and/or otherwise use the appearance, name and likeness, in whole or in part, in any and all manner and media now known or hereafter devised, in all languages, in perpetuity.

I warrant and represent that I am 18 years of age and all the information listed is true.

NAME: ____________________________

Signature: _________________________

Print Name: _______________________

Address: __________________________

________________________________

Phone: ___________________________

Date: _____________________________
References


Bennett, Maya. Personal interview. 31 Mar. 2018.


O'Rear, Isaiah. “Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS).” National Center for Education Statistics, National Center for Education Statistics, 10 May 2014, nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass1112_2013314_t1s_002.asp.

Plater, Xavier. Personal interview. 22 May. 2017.


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Thompson, Brandon. Personal interview. 31 Mar. 2018.

