Soundwalks
Developed for the classroom by Nick Jaworski
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Leading Notes article: http://leadingnotes.org/2012/02/06/jaworski-3/

For more music education unit ideas and musings, visit www.nickjaworski.com.
Initially inspired by the work of Janet Cardiff: http://www.cardiffmiller.com/artworks/walks/
Further inspired by the work at www.soundwalk.com

If you’ve downloaded this document, then you are interested in learning how to create your own soundwalk projects. While this document is very detailed in explaining how to create your own soundwalks, please take it as a collection of suggestions - not hard and fast rules. I’ve learned that creating projects that are engaging and easy to follow is a complex task; there are a lot of small components that must come together! However, with the right guidance and focus, the process is very enjoyable and the finished product is simply one-of-a-kind.

Again, for a brief introduction to the soundwalk, including philosophical rationale and examples, read the following article on Leading Notes: http://leadingnotes.org/2012/02/06/jaworski-3/.

What is a soundwalk?

Short definition:
A soundwalk is a fancy audio tour.

Longer definition:
The soundwalk takes the audio tour and adds characters, sounds, and plot - all while placing the listener in “real world” environments (i.e. not museums) - to create hyperreal, immersive experiences that allow the listener to explore an often familiar world in new ways.

For examples of what a soundwalk might look like, click here.

Before starting your soundwalk:

1. Determine what equipment you have
   a. What software and recording devices do you have access to. I have used both Audacity (free, open-source) and GarageBand to complete soundwalks - usually in tandem.

2. Determine the physical boundaries that you or your students have to work within
   a. Safety - Make sure that any potential route is safe!
   b. Reasonable Accessibility - You should pick locations that will not be disruptive to the general population. In public spaces, this means no bathrooms and no

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journeys to the back room of your favorite restaurant. In a school, this means no trips into classrooms.

Creating your soundwalk:
While, undoubtedly, there are a variety of methods to create a soundwalk, the approach outlined below has worked well with students in the past.

1. **Brainstorm character, plot, and genre ideas before location and route** - It might seem odd to think about character before going out and exploring your surroundings, but I've found that spending just a little time thinking about potential characters, what might happen to them, and how the story might be told goes a long way in focusing your attention when you start scouting locations.

2. **Explore your surroundings.** Remember, choosing a location that you are very familiar with might cause you to rely too much on your real-life experiences. This causes some people to create a soundwalk that is interesting to the few who share that experience with you. The most interesting and evocative soundwalks that my students have created involve routes that were specifically designed to tell a story. Keep this in mind.

3. **Decide on a route and document it.** You could sketch it out, take notes, a series of pictures, or make a video. In fact, you could do all of the above!

4. **Figure out the timing for the walk.** While making a video is one way to document the walk, I've actually found that simply writing out the timings between important landmarks allows for the greatest flexibility when editing together your soundwalk. When I created mine, I simply walked the route, then made notes of important landmarks and places that I might want to stop. Once I had my list, I made an audio recording (using my iPhone) of me completing the entire walk. As I walked, I made note of when I arrived at various points (and when I might reference other landmarks, “I’m passing the clock now.”). Lastly, I sat down and timed both the location of the landmarks in the entire walk and the distance between each individual landmark. Timing your walk this way allows you to make adjustments to the timeline if you end up wanting your listener to linger longer at specific locations.

5. **Test your directions.** Create a track with all of your directions. You can include some narration and plot if you want, but the main purpose of this track is to ensure that your directions are clear and that they help the listener get from point A to point B. Test the track on somebody else who is unfamiliar with the walk. Get feedback on parts that were unclear, fix them, and test again. Once this part gets settled, you can go on to adding plot, character, and narration.

6. **Record your audio with character and plot.** I found it useful to record my audio while watching the timer. This allows you to see how your narration is fitting within your time constraints. You can take multiple takes (on multiple tracks) of your narration and piece it together as you go, adjusting the time as necessary.

7. **Add sounds and music*.** This is where a simple audio tour turns into an immersive experience. The use of sound effects and music work to create the hyperreality that was discussed in the Leading Notes article. Listening to and participating in a well-constructed soundwalk feels a lot like being thrown into the center of movie - with you're as the main character! For more information on the use of sounds and music, please see the “Sound and Music Tips” section below.

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8. **Test!** Now that you’ve added plot, character, and sounds, it’s important to make sure that your soundwalk can still be navigated by somebody who has no idea where they are going before starting. Make sure that timings are correct, that all safety precautions have been taken, and that the narration is clearly audible at all times.

9. **Revise** - Make whatever adjustments are needed after your previous test.

10. **Test again!** - Made revisions? Then, you have to test the whole walk now, preferably with somebody who has never done the walk before.

11. **Repeat steps 9 & 10 (as necessary).** Remember, a walk that a listener can’t easily complete becomes practically useless. Testing is the only way to get things right.

12. **Share with the world!*** Congrats! You’re done with the walk. Now, you just have to get somebody to do it! See the section below, labeled “Sharing and Publicizing Your Soundwalk” for ideas.

**General Soundwalk Tips:**

- **Public Access:** Depending on where you plan on creating your soundwalk, you need to consider what availability people will have to the locations in your project. If you’re having listeners walk within a school building, you should stay out of individual classrooms. Why? Because you don’t know if, at any given point, the classroom will be in use. It’s best to stay in the halls and large rooms (like cafeterias, gymnasiums, and auditoriums). The same concept applies to a soundwalk that occurs in public spaces. You should, as much as possible, keep the listener in spaces that they can get to at all reasonable hours of the day. When planning your soundwalk, at every location, ask yourself, “Will there ever be an occasion when a listener would not have access to this location?” If the answer is yes, try to work around it.

- **Choose interesting spaces, not necessarily familiar ones.** Perhaps counterintuitively, locations that you are less familiar with might facilitate better projects. Often times, people will choose a location first and try to fit the space into experiences they’re familiar with. While this can be rewarding for the artist, these projects tend to focus on recreating experiences that the artist is familiar with instead of creating new, immersive ones that everybody can enjoy.

- **No elevators.** Perhaps this seems obvious, but I was surprised at the amount of times that my students used elevators in their projects. Just to be clear: There is no way to ensure that the elevator will behave the same way every time. This will throw off your timing. The appropriate amount of testing would reveal this. **Caveat: The only way an elevator would work is if you were to instruct the listener to take the elevator at their earliest convenience and then wait once they reach the desired floor. In the meantime, you could tell a story that was long enough to ensure that, even at its slowest, the listener could get on and off the elevator.**

- **Avoid crossing streets (as much as possible).** Take the difficulty of timing an elevator (see above) and combine it with large vehicles that could cause some serious injuries and you see how complicated this is. Having said that, sometimes you have to cross the street to tell your story. If that is the case, two things must happen. First, instruct the listener to carefully cross the street - make sure they look in all potential directions. Words like “carefully,” and “watch and listen for vehicles,” go a long way. Remember, the

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Soundwalk

Uni Suggs by Nick Jaworski.

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listener is wearing headphones and (hopefully) immersed in a world you’ve created. It is your job to make sure they take every possible precaution while crossing the street. Second, allow plenty of extra time for the listener to cross the street. Just like the elevator caveat above, you’ll have to tell important character or plot points long enough to ensure that they can make it across the street. This approach provides the listener with something to do while they wait on the other side.

Sound and music tips

- **Use footsteps!** By including footsteps in your soundwalk, you provide a lot of important information to the listener. First and foremost, you’re confirming to the listener that they should or should not be walking at a given time! It is very useful to have the footsteps reinforce the narration. Secondly, the footsteps can be changed to meet certain environments. For example, your soundwalk might take place in a shallow pond. If that’s the case, then normal footsteps on pavement won’t work - you need to have footsteps in water. It really helps create a sense of place within the walk, transforming our surroundings into new environments and locations entirely.

- **Record high quality narrations.** This is not an article on how to record, but every attempt should be made to record your narration, characters, and other sounds in the highest possible quality with the highest quality performances. The sense of closeness and gloss in the recording helps create the immersive experiences you’re looking for. I’ve found that using a microphone windscreen allows for very nuanced vocal performances that work well within the soundwalk genre. Perhaps my years of listening to This American Life have brainwashed me, but when it’s appropriate, an amplified soft vocal performance can be very effective - the intimacy and proximity to the speaker is palatable. For that to work, you have to make sure the room you record in is as quiet as possible. Teachers might have to schedule special times before or after school to record student narrations. Lastly, allow plenty of time for multiple vocal takes - you want performances that will be engaging to the listener.

- **Download sounds from the Internet.** Don’t be afraid to visit sites like freesound.org to download sounds that have been released for use under Creative Commons licenses. Obviously, not every sound that has a file name that matches what you want is going to work in your project. I’ve found that students often think that any set of footsteps will work - that is not the case, though. You want to have sounds that are evocative of a certain environment. Keep searching for sounds until you get the ones you need. Better yet, make your own sounds!

- **Deliberately place sounds within the headphones.** Yes, there are more technical ways of explaining this, but the key point is that you should pan sounds left or right depending on their location with the world you’ve created. If, for example, a character walks by the listener on their left side, the sounds associated with that event should occur towards the left ear. It is amazing how responsive our eyes are to the location of sounds. Avoid panning sounds all of the way to the left or right side, however - we rarely hear sounds that isolated in our world.

- **Decide on musical and film genres.** Certain cinematic genres elicit certain types of music. Nobody is going to confuse the music of an action film set in the present day with the music of a 17th century period piece. By making decisions about the type of story - horror, comedy, romance, mystery, action - certain sounds and composition types come to mind. Encourage this type of exploration when planning your own soundwalk.

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Sharing and Publicizing Your Soundwalks

Once you’ve finished your soundwalks, you have to find a way to share them with the general public. Here are some suggestions:

- **Create a website.** Invite anybody to download the files and compete the walks on their own time. Of course, if you do this, you’ll need to provide very specific details for where to start and when the walk can be complete. Visit [www.soundwalk.com](http://www.soundwalk.com) for an example of the kind of information (maps, directions, audio samples) that you might need to provide.

- **Participate/create in an art show or open house.** If you’re doing this project with students, creating soundwalks that could be easily experienced during a large event like an art show or open house might be ideal. This would add viability to the soundwalk as a work of installation art and provide an easy way for your students to share their works.

- **Create videos of the finished soundwalks.** Obviously, watching a video of a completed soundwalk is not the same as physically experiencing it. However, for people who can’t experience the walk in person (extended family, for example), it serves as a viable substitute. Also, having a video of your soundwalk would help archive the piece in case there is construction or some other reason that the walk is no longer feasible.

- **Cite any sounds you used in the creation of your soundwalk.** While the sounds you downloaded might have been free due to a Creative Commons license, make sure that you follow all of the required restrictions. If the creator of the sound needs to be credited, a website is the perfect place to do it. You could also link directly to the sound.

- **Release the soundwalk under a Creative Commons license.** While obviously not required, it is good to be aware of your rights when it comes to sharing your creative work. If you are teaching this project to students, their intellectual property rights should be made abundantly clear. If your students are under 18, then you will need permission from their parents to publish the soundwalk online. Every district handles these issues differently, but I think it is important to address the very important issue of copyright and ownership with your students.

*Pro sharing tip:*

- **Attach a picture or map with the starting location using metadata.** If you attach a picture of the starting location to the mp3 file (which is how you would presumably share the file online), then that picture will show up on most mp3 players. This allows the listener to compare what they see with the image on their iPhone or iPod. Click [here](#) to learn how to add a picture to your mp3 in iTunes.

- **Create maps and directions.** If you share the items online, the website should include a map and written directions. While you don’t want people using the map, people will want to see where they start and where they end before embarking on your walk.

Again, this document is just one way to approach the creation of a soundwalk. The key is to explore spaces and, in some ways, your own creative process. Completing a soundwalk requires a unique iterative process that many may not be familiar with. While the unfamiliar can be scary, embrace it! In the end, you’ll have a product that will make you proud and bring others immense joy.

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