

Do pandemic teaching innovations have a place in post pandemic pedagogy?

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Abstract

Students “benefit from podcasts flexibility and portability of being available via the Web or apps on mobile or wearable devices to enhance not only the course content but also their learning experience” (Sims, 2021)

Responding to changing culture and technology across the journalism industry is a central challenge for tutors (Frost, 2018). Like a moving news story, our curriculum never rests and is continuously developing. Equally, delivering theoretical learning – as opposed to developing students’ skills base – places unfamiliar demands on educators entering academia from industry.

This article draws on our experience in delivering a module of undergraduate study which focuses on both history and contemporary practice in journalism, coverage of the climate crisis, social movements, misinformation, as well as diversity and inclusion both in relation to portrayal and to employment in the industry.

The first months of Covid lockdowns forced a sea-change in how journalism educators delivered teaching (Quandt and Wahl-Jorgensen, 2021), and created particular challenges for a module designed to enhance the students' understanding of urgent societal and ethical issues that journalism deals with.

This article examines how we invited guest speakers – authors of landmark reports, and working journalists committed to moving their sector forwards - and asked students to produce news articles based on these sessions. These activities built on the student's introduction to the wider topic through a podcast series that used augmented audio with rich media scripts, including video, stills and hyperlinks rather than traditional PowerPoint presentations. These created an intimate conversation which also demonstrated contemporary journalism practice via a co-working, “platform” approach (Maniou, Stark, Touwen, 2020).

Using responses from students, and by critically analysing other emerging teaching practices, the article evaluates how these two methods helped students to engage more actively with theoretical concepts. The article concludes with an assessment of whether there is place for this style of learning as higher education moves beyond pandemic crisis mode.

Keywords: professional practice, diversity and inclusion, audio, climate change, social movements, podcasts

Introduction

It is well known that Covid caused a sudden, comprehensive, shift to online-only learning (Adedoyin and Soykan, 2020). In addition, at our institution, the introduction of a “Block

teaching” timetable meant compressing 12 weeks of learning into six.

There was recognition among some university leaders that poor WiFi, low data connections and lack of access to quiet study spaces highlighted technology inclusion issues (House of Commons Petitions Committee, 2020). The Office for Students found that more than half (52 percent) of students surveyed said their learning had been impacted by slow or unreliable internet connections. Almost 10 percent said they had been ‘severely impacted’ by lack of access to appropriate online learning materials during the first year of the pandemic. More than a quarter (29 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that they did not have access to quiet study spaces during lockdown (Office for Students, 2020).

While the UK government created a mechanism for school students to get access to laptops and broadband routers at home, the scheme was not extended to students in the HE sector. This was despite the view of the Children’s Commissioner for England, that “particularly during this pandemic, proper access to the internet is not a luxury, but a necessity. It is the same as not having a book or a pen and must be recognised as such” (Children’s Commissioner for England, 2020). This mirrored the experience of researchers in the USA, who concluded that “broadband is essential to the success of students across the country, and finally lays to rest the concerns of those who say that high-speed internet is just a luxury good.” (Fishbane and Tomer, 2020).

Our own experience, and anecdotally from colleagues across the sector, is that already falling student attendance and engagement prior to lockdown accelerated during this period. It remains an issue. There is also evidence (Snelling, 2022; Khan, 2021) that student engagement with traditional teaching methods – lectures and Powerpoint presentations – is falling. The nature of the first year module - Journalism, Media and Society - where these podcasts were principally aimed, involved content which was issues-based and theoretical. We were therefore aware that we needed to create learning materials which would reflect and embrace emerging technology under lockdown and which needed to respond to students’ practical needs in these novel circumstances.

The initial purpose of the podcasts was to provide students with a portable, media-rich format which they could listen to (and return to) during the daily walk that people were allowed under the Delta wave lockdown of January 2021 (Institute for Government, 2022).

The aim of this portable learning material was for it to be accessible to a range of students who faced multiple challenges for their attention. We also wanted to demonstrate multimedia journalism techniques in the creation of learning materials, aware from industry reports that there is growing consumption of podcasts among 18-25-year-olds (EdisonResearch, 2021).

It took a while to develop the format. Initially, we uploaded them to Moodle, the virtual learning environment, and also the university video sharing platform so we could subtitle each one. This was onerous and, as internal viewing figures suggested, was not something that was particularly important to the students. They preferred to download it. We provided a PowerPoint with links so they could deepen their learning as they listened along.

The podcast was finessed over time. Partly, it was a desire to decrease the workflow in producing the podcast. We also wanted to reflect industry practice as fully as possible. Lastly, we understood that listening is not necessarily the learning mode that suits everybody. So, the answer was to produce a script which contained all the hyperlinks, references and images that illustrated what we were talking about.

The script became a companion to the podcast that showed the students not only how to put together a long form piece of audio, but was a reference tool that they could come back to if they started to panic about their assessments.

The podcast was more than just us talking to the students. As any production does, we used audio extracts from topical sources, brought in guests and gave it an identity with music. We aimed to stay within standard acceptable lengths with episodes no more than half an hour in duration. More complex issues, such as journalism’s role in social movements, were broken down into two-part recordings.

Where do podcasts sit in the academic context?

Studies of similar kinds of pedagogical resources have been mixed.

One examination of the use of audio files rather than simple texts to deliver material in physiology found only “trivial” differences in success rates, smaller than one percent, less than the margin of error (Abt and Barry, 2007).

An early study by McKinney, Dyck and Luber (2009) found that podcasts provided an advantage “only when the student took notes as they would do during a lecture, and when they listened to the lecture more than once. In essence, the same things a student does during the actual lecture, they would need to do to show a benefit of the podcast”.

Lonn and Teasley (2009) looked at the application of podcasts as a learning tool and backed up our blended approach. Podcasting works well for capturing fundamental topics but that, for this technique to act “as a catalyst to change instruction in higher education, instructors must be willing to adjust their teaching styles and not merely lecture, but create environments that provide a variety of learning opportunities.”

Without a doubt, podcast learning gives tutors “the option to take the learning to the learners when they have time to learn” (Stoten, 2007, p. 57) which, in the context of the increasing outside pressures students face, enables a greater amount of the cohort to engage in their course.

A study on the use of (video) podcasts in medical teaching at Leipzig found that “students...used the lecture podcast about twice as often as attending lectures; however, for the majority of the students the provision of a video podcast was no reason not to attend the lecture” (Health & Medicine Week, 2022).

Saunders and Hutt (2015) found that multimedia technology in learning has the advantage that it can “be paused, replayed and reflected upon”. This was also noted by Gachago, Livingston and Ivala in their study of podcasts designed for mature, first generation, and second language speaking students in South Africa. In particular: “the course content and the manner in which podcasting was implemented in the courses impacted strongly on students’ perception of its usefulness and consequently on their level of engagement. As one of the factors contributing to the level of engagement, we found that regular podcasts of difficult, content-heavy lectures seem to have attracted most engagement.” (Gachago, et al, 2016)

Similarly, Guzik et al (2020) found that “supplementing online and classroom-based courses with complementary online videos and podcasts can enhance learners’ engagement in the course and expand their understanding”. This implementation of ‘blended learning’ (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004), whilst not new, was accelerated (also overnight) due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Other instances of dedicated podcast series recorded in response to pandemic teaching conditions are difficult to find. One example is from the staff at St. John’s Institute of Dermatology who produced an open access podcast that “was delivered by expert dermatologists and supplemented with online summaries of learning objectives, key facts and references” (Paulino et al, 2021). The series addressed core learning objectives and, like Journalism and Media in Society, the recordings were supported by interactive webinars. Responses from listeners was positive as “seventy-five per cent of podcast users reported episodes as having a useful impact on their clinical practice and knowledge” (ibid).

The literature also highlights areas for further development, and this is where, we believe, the Journalism and Media in Society podcasts can serve as a model for fellow journalism educators and others.

Notably, researchers have found that producing more interactive material can significantly improve students’ engagement and enhance their learning from the podcast. “Learning via the interaction between students themselves, the course content, peers and course educators is essential for transferring podcast content” (Andersen and Dau, 2021). Researchers at one HEI in London found “podcasts for teaching and learning are no ‘golden bullet’, but...they may help bridge cohort discrepancies” (Conroy and Kidd, 2022). There may also be increasing demand for a greater proportion of learning materials made available in portable, asynchronous “mobile learning” formats which are widely accessible for students using smartphones in their own time (Huls, 2022).

A step further is podcast production by students, or in collaboration between students and tutors, which is also seen to have benefits in developing critical thinking and community engagement (Ferrer, Lorenzetti and Shaw, 2019). It is in these two areas where we believe the podcasts produced for the Journalism and Media in Society module may have demonstrated significant long-term benefits which other journalism educators could emulate and develop, and which we explore further below.

Our production backgrounds and notes on the journalism podcast sector

Both authors had some experience of podcast production. Before leaving the news and broadcasting sectors to become a journalism educator, Peter Murray used Apple's GarageBand to produce scores of "enhanced podcasts", a format which was curtailed by Apple in 2013 (Sullivan, 2019), ironically just before the global podcast explosion around Serial happened in 2014. Eleanor Shember-Critchley produced numerous podcasts in previous roles, and during first lockdown began the Postcards from Home series. At MMU, the authors produced a series of media law and ethics podcasts, Bang to Rights, featuring MMU colleagues as fellow presenters, and using interviews with working journalists, legal commentators, and student participants. Feedback was universally positive from both students and media law lecturers elsewhere in the sector. Additional workload arising from the pandemic lockdown meant we stopped producing them, but intend to revive the series for 2022/23.

We have always looked for opportunities to embed industry skills within our teaching. The Digital News Report (Reuters Institute Digital News Report, n.d.) along with the Trends and Predictions report is a core part of Journalism and Media in Society. We start this unit by setting the scene via these reports before delving back into the context of journalism's history and later, its thematic, socially linked, issues. At the Reuters Institute, Nic Newman and Nathan Gallo's findings (2020) repeatedly bang the drum for podcasts as a form of journalism to reach wider audiences for an industry that faces multiple sustainability challenges.

How the podcasts became a pedagogical response to lockdown

When lockdown happened, the thought of speaking to PowerPoint slides over recorded videos seemed an anathema to our general approach of how we teach students. We have conversations with them, we tease out issues that affect the industry and our practice; very rarely, if ever, do we lecture at them.

There is something particularly intimate and sensory about communicating with somebody in their ear which meant that the sometimes-sensitive issues that we discussed in Journalism, Media and Society were well suited to this medium.

There have long been concerns that the increasing use of technology to facilitate asynchronous learning will empty the classroom. Indeed, for some traditional lectures captured on video, this may be true. We countered this by using the podcast as a baseline introduction to a topic; it provided the students what they needed to know for when they arrived into the virtual or physical classroom. Co-presented sessions then built on this with the use of guest speakers and activities which, in turn, decreased the value of staying home and watching back the 'lecture'.

We all remember the yawning chasm of a Teams call when nobody had their cameras on except for the tutors, so at least the podcast gave us a way in to start the conversation beyond what Netflix series the students had been bingeing.

The format developed over the course of the 2020/21 academic year, so that by September 2021, we came up with what some would call an object-based podcast; the kind of content which museums and galleries have used for many years. In our case, we took the new student cohort on a walking tour around some of the milestones in Manchester's history of radical journalism. The guided audio introduced them to some of the sounds of the city, to archivists, editors and journalists working in Manchester, as well as the work of everyone from John Tyas who reported on the Peterloo massacre for The Times, to Friedrich Engels and George Orwell's writings about journalism and the city in the mid-19th and 20th centuries.

Sitting next to the statue of Alan Turing in the Gay Village, one student exclaimed to their new friends: "That's it, I've found my home, I'm staying right here".

It had become clear that the format had successfully developed well beyond the "course casting" or "audio lecture" type of podcast which may be more familiar in some other academic contexts, and which are simply a way of disseminating traditional lecture material outside the classroom.

Students' responses

We knew, before embarking on this research project, that students were using the audio podcast and accompanying script productively, and in the way we had hoped. References which we had provided as hyperlinks within the text were appearing as citations in the students' own work. However, for the purposes of the research, we needed somewhat more rigorous data.

We secured this in two ways. As part of one of the podcasts designed for use by teaching colleagues (see section 6, below), we interviewed a small group of students, so that their comments could be included, anonymously, as an audio clip in one of the recordings. Each interviewee (a total of four second-year students) described the positive impact of the podcasts on their learning experience during the 2020-21 lockdowns. This is a sample of what was said:

"It was a good way of getting students either out of their bedroom, or out of the library. You can go on a walk and use them. I just thought it was really useful."

"To have the script as well as the podcast, it makes different types of media to use."

One also noted that the podcast was more inclusive: "Sometimes people speak too fast, or too slowly, or have accents, and I find it difficult to actually process the sound. But with the documents it really helped, and so I could follow along, in two ways."

In addition, we set up an anonymous Microsoft Forms poll, with a total of six questions for students to respond to. We emailed the link to students who had studied the Journalism and Media in Society module during the pandemic, and so had regularly used the podcasts. Most responded by saying they listened to the podcasts either once a week, or multiple times per episode. One student said they listened "just for assessment support".

In further feedback on the podcasts' impact on their learning, students said:

"I found them quite helpful as I could listen to them anywhere."

"They helped lay the groundwork on what we should study further in our own time."

"I found them really good as I was able to listen and make notes when necessary but also loved having the script as well so I could save it and always have something to look back on."

Students added that they would find the learning podcast format useful in non-pandemic conditions. Comments included:

"They helped me as an autistic student break down the learning in digestible chunks that were easy to revisit."

"I think when doing the prep work for the week it was best for me to have that mixture of learning materials as it helped me to stay engaged for longer."

"They're easy to access and find at a later date, I'm also a very visual/sound orientated learner and would often playback the podcast again as a refresher – very efficient."

At the time of writing, we are proposing to continue to provide a range of weekly learning podcasts as part of the Journalism and Media in Society module during 2022/23. In addition, the format will be added to some other units – as was requested by students themselves in the survey – for second and third year study. Wider student feedback and a larger number of students in a focus group towards the end of Semester Two (April/May 2023), will elicit further data to help us extend and refine the format in later years.

The anonymous survey confirmed our own anecdotal responses from students, which had been unanimously favourable. It means we are also looking at applying the format to other teaching units as a way of delivering, for example, assignment briefs to augment the video briefings we have provided since 2020/21.

Now you can do it, too!

The authors have also produced a number of podcasts which would guide colleagues who have no broadcasting or media production experience in how they too can produce similar learning materials for their own

students in their own sector. These included techniques such as using “simulrecs” - using a mobile phone to record audio, and to the creation of home studios - under bunk beds, or piles of blankets - with the help of the award-winning producer of *The Tip Off* podcast, Maeve McClenaghan (McClenaghan, 2022).

Peter Murray has interviewed Maeve and other leading podcasters several times in recent years, and many of them say they started these projects on a bit of a whim and with minimal equipment, because it seemed like a novel approach, and then learned along the way how to do it better. In this case, both authors had some professional and technical preparation, but even so, when the project started it too was largely experimental.

Our experience chimes with that of multimedia journalists surveyed in one study (Kartveit, 2017), who thought of themselves as both “learners” and “collaborators” in the process of multimedia production. In this respect, producing the podcasts was another element of our wider objective of mirroring professional industry practice in our teaching methods and learning materials (Conroy and Kidd, 2022).

A next step would be to investigate more media-rich production options. Our students, just like millions of others, are already familiar with Spotify’s tools that allow listeners to read song lyrics or selected podcast scripts as they listen. More recently, Apple has added automatic subtitling tools to its iOS, which demonstrates the pace at which the technology is developing (Hardwick, 2021). Organisations such as the BBC have experimented with new podcast tools that include scripts and animated graphics (Hartford, Alexander and Baume, 2019), although it is not clear if these have gone beyond the development stage. So, technology permitting (Octaviani and Baume, 2020), there may be other ways that we can enhance the podcasts by including animations, video or other content.

Another area for development of the podcast method would be to include students as co-producers. The theoretical underpinning of this would lie in Freirean principles of critical pedagogy, and collaborative, problem-solving learning (Giroux, 2010). Other, similar, projects (Canter and Wilkinson, 2021) have demonstrated positive outcomes for students’ confidence and entrepreneurial skills. One practical consequence would be that students are able to participate in the research and writing process to “road test” scripts for accessibility of language; another is that students would be able to point out topics and questions which they felt required more (or perhaps less) explanation.

Whichever direction the project takes, multimedia journalism students and educators have an opportunity to collaborate and take the use of the learning podcast medium some way beyond the familiar low-tech learning resources which are in use across numerous HE institutions.

Only forward

The next academic year sees this pandemic fading, at least in memory. But we have learned that our students, every student, is facing an increasingly complex set of circumstances that they must navigate alongside their university education. We know that rising cases of poor mental health, the need to work to sustain fees, the cost of living and difficult family relationships are just some of the pressures they face (Neves and Brown, 2022).

Tutors across universities have reported decreasing student attendance and engagement. Whilst it is a relief to know it is not personal, it has us considering whether learning podcasts have a future role in mitigating the worst impact of student circumstances.

Our experience of producing these podcasts and gauging student feedback chimes with evidence from other academic disciplines and professional sectors. In the field of urban planning (Moore, 2022), learning resources of this kind help create a more inclusive environment, provide more fixed points for students’ learning, and gives them confidence to explore new ideas in their assignments.

Ultimately, the project has shown that podcasts provide an equal platform for students to engage in their learning. They do not discriminate against a student’s ability to attend a live session that day, they exist beyond the co-present timetable, and they are inclusive. As journalism educators, conscious of how unequal our industry is and wanting to create learning conditions for all, that has to be a good thing.

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