

Building a study community through podcasts during Covid-19

Julia Bohlmann

University of Glasgow, UK

Micky Ross

University of Glasgow, UK

Keywords: Covid-19; international students; study community; podcasts.

The challenge

Maintaining community online

For us, the main challenge of the pandemic was to maintain the learning community we had established before lockdown. This is a difficult task at the best of times as we teach international undergraduates and postgraduate taught students from all subject areas, with most attendees enrolled on PGT social science programmes. A big concern for us was how we were going to keep our students engaged and confident (Kahn et al., 2017; Nordman et al., 2020). We knew that the casual and informal conversations that we had with students after face-to-face lectures and workshops played an important role in creating a rapport with them. In those conversations we often reassured students and informally provided solutions for learning problems. The challenge was to move these more casual encounters into the detached and more impersonal online environment.

The response

Podcasts as shared spaces to engage online

Our response was to create a series of podcasts with, and for, our learning community, that ran alongside our academic writing classes. The podcasts were not standalone events, but closely embedded into our provision in that they rounded up a week's classes. As one series of classes typically lasts five consecutive weeks at a time, we created a series of five podcasts:

- Transitioning into Academic Study.
- Reading and Writing Critically.
- Literature, Plagiarism, and Demonstrating Criticality.
- Navigating Academic Discourse.
- Semester Round-up.

The podcasts aired on Zoom once a week and were approximately 50 minutes of recording time. The reason for this length was to allow time for the wider conversation to develop, to allow processing and thinking time for our students, and to ensure an inclusive approach with all voices being heard. Recordings were then posted as audio and video files, with an accompanying audio-transcript for accessibility, onto the relevant Moodle course. Aiming for a good flow was important to us to keep student engagement. It seemed easiest to keep this flow when we had a guest speaker as it added variety and brought a new dimension to the podcast.

An important feature of our podcasts was that they were recorded with a live student audience; 20 to 50 students attended any live session. In our experience this was fun, informal, and collaborative. There were no slides dictating the direction of travel. The dialogue mirrored an academic debate that included students as collaborators and, in doing so, created an inclusive virtual classroom where transcultural learning could take place (Ryan, 2011).

To encourage students to participate, we created options to simply listen, contribute by unmuting, contribute by posting a question publicly in the chat, or contribute with a high level of anonymity by messaging us directly during the live podcast. After the live podcast, we posted the recording of the session, with an audio-transcript, to our virtual learning environment, creating provision with synchronous and asynchronous content in line with the principles for a temporary online pivot (Nordman et.al., 2020).

We aimed to empower our students by adopting a relaxed and informal conversational style, encouraging participation through questions to which we responded directly. This participation allowed learners to direct the flow of the podcast, which, for us, spoke to so much of the fundamentals of what we were trying to achieve in terms of pedagogy. For example, our sessions are active in the sense of Dewey's (1939) fundamental theory on freedom in education as well as dialogic and problem-posing in the nature of Freire's

(1993) critical pedagogy. Letting students take part in the podcasts was key as it underlined those principles.

The feedback we received from students was really encouraging and heart-warming:

- I wanted to personally say I value your hard work and personal effort to keep the academic community together while delivering the sessions.
- Thank you so much for guiding and accompanying my journey.
- I just wanted to drop a line to say hello and thank you and *** for the workshops. I find them not only helpful but caring and providing good company in the way you address them.
- Very enlightening stuff.
- It [the podcast] is the best part of my day.

The comments suggest we achieved our aims with the podcasts and created a sense of belonging to, and involvement in, our learning community at the university. They allowed us all to come out of our prescribed roles as teachers and students, instead coming together simply as people having an informal conversation about learning.

Recommendations

When we started podcasting, we did so with little idea about how it would go or what success we would have. It turned out to be a big success for us. And now that we have had a chance to reflect on the experience, we can see why. Podcasting as part of teaching and learning engages students because it brings a typically formal discourse into an informal setting. Unlike live or recorded lectures, podcasts can quite literally be taken outside of the more formal learning space of the classroom (or the desk at home during the pandemic) and be listened to anywhere. Moreover, while students taking notes in a live lecture need to keep pace with the teacher, a podcast can be stopped, repeated, and listened to again and again. The learner has much more control over how and when they are exposed to learning content (Rothwell, 2008).

In our experience podcasts proved to be an effective way to build and maintain a learning and teaching community online and, as the student feedback suggests, they were effective.

They were also re-energising for us as teachers, as they brought a new dimension to our teaching practice that allowed us to engage with students in an innovative way that also spoke directly to our professional teaching and learning values.

An important key to success was to make the podcast seem effortless and informal without it looking aimless. To do this, we recommend the following:

- Identify potential guests and contact them early.
- Decide on distinct roles (e.g., chair, timekeeper, chat monitor) in advance and inform guests of their roles.
- Choose a rough plan over an overly scripted one.
- Establish a rapport with guests before students arrive.
- Start with a recap of themes covered that week.
- Introduce guests and invite students to post questions in the chat.
- Respond to student questions and integrate them into the debate.
- Finish by providing take home messages and remind students of upcoming classes.

Going forward, we will reflect on how to hone the structure and delivery of the podcasts. In particular, we are thinking about how to blend this new (for us) online format with face-to-face classes in order to ensure the podcasts' post-pandemic continuity.

References

Dewey, J. (1939) *Freedom and culture*. New York: Kappa Delta Pi.

Freire, P. (1993) *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Rev. edn. New York: Continuum.

Kahn, P., Everington, L., Kelm, K., Reid, I. and Watkins, F. (2017) 'Understanding student engagement in online learning environments: the role of reflexivity', *Educational technology research and development*, 65(1), pp.203-218.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-016-9484-z>.

Nordmann, E., Horlin, C., Hutchison, J., Murray, J., Robson, L., Seery, M. K. and MacKay, J. R. D. (2020) 'Ten simple rules for supporting a temporary online pivot in higher

education', *PLoS Computational Biology*, 16(10), pp.e1008242-e1008242.

<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1008242>.

Rothwell, L. (2008) 'Podcasts and collaborative learning', in Salmon, G. (ed.) *Podcasting for learning in universities*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Ryan, J. (2011) 'Teaching and learning for international students: towards a transcultural approach', *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice*, 17(6), pp.631-648.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2011.625138>.

Author details

Julia Bohlmann is an Effective Learning Adviser at the University of Glasgow where she advises international students and strives for inclusivity in learning and teaching. She is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy and Senior Fellow of the University of Glasgow's Recognising Excellence in Teaching framework. Her background is in Cultural Studies and Cinema History.

Micky Ross is an Effective Learning Adviser at the University of Glasgow. He has a PhD in Education and is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. He is committed to holistic approaches to learning, education for empowerment and social change, and research and scholarship that explores the learning experience of students in higher education.