Podcasting: supporting students' learning experience and enabling innovative practices among academic staff

Research report
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Research Team:

Dr Silvia Gullino MRTPI MArch MSc SFHEA | Associate Professor in City Making, School of Engineering and Built Environment

Elodie Wakerley | Education Developer, Birmingham City University

Simeon Shtebunaev | PhD Candidate, School of Engineering and Built Environment

Conor Matthews | BSc Property Development and Planning Student

Archie Wootton | BSc Property Development and Planning Student

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01.Introduction

The recent Covid-19 lockdown has forced lecturers to rapidly shift their teaching and modules/courses content online. While the complexity and the effectiveness of such transition is still the object of discussion and reflection, the online switch has also offered interesting opportunities to rethink how to reconfigure blended learning (online/offline, synchronous/asynchronous, and active/passive methods) in order to ensure effective and creative students' experience and discuss new practices across different academic communities.

In light of developing online learning as result of possible lockdowns and/or restricted access to the University campus, it is important to rethink how to enhance online students' learning experience, how lecturers can enthuse students through a range of learning activities and how to use technology to facilitate an interactive dialogue between students and lecturers (Campbell, 2005; Salmon, 2008).

This research project drew upon the experience of a final year module (BNV6124 Drivers of Change) taught pre-Covid lockdown within the BSc Property Development and Planning (PDP) course, in which podcasting was used as both a teaching and learning method and as a form of interactive assessment (student-generated podcasts). Having not experienced the inclusion of podcasting in their academic learning before, its use enthused and inspired students and the module resulted in high level student satisfaction.

By involving such cohort of Property Development and Planning final year students acting as co-creators of knowledge, this research aimed at (1) critically exploring their podcasting experience within the BNV6124 module and the benefits of generating podcasts; (2) exploring their educational potential and encouraging a more systematic use of podcasting in CEBE (teaching, learning and assessment).

02.The rationale

The rationale behind focusing on podcasting in education is multi-fold:

1. It is an innovative, time-efficient form of communication and can be a great alternative to deliver teaching/research content;
2. From being used mainly recreationally, podcasting has gained popularity in education. Yet as a form of interactive assessment it has not been widely used.
3. It can support students carrying out a significant part of their studies online, as it enables asynchronous learning anytime (students can access podcasts from their mobile phones) and it meets students' different needs in terms of learning (Ng'ambi & Lombe, 2012);
4. If considered as part of assessment, the technology requested for students to generate podcasts is simple: mobile phones or tablets and an easily accessible software;
5. There is a discipline gap: podcasting has gained great popularity yet there is limited offer of planning focused podcasts (Fifty Shades of Planning, 99 Percent Invisible, Curbed's Nice Try, Monocle 24: The Urbanist).

03.A note on the methodology

The field research for this project was undertaken online using Microsoft Teams. At the core of the investigation were two intertwined questions:

(a) What **podcast format** can best support students in their learning? (b) What **learning activities and support** do students need to generate podcasts as a form of assessment?

Methods included:

1. Desk research
2. Online workshop involving final year planning students to gauge their experience of the teaching method, learning outcomes and assessment (pre-lock down module)
3. A seminar with a consultant expert in planning related communication via podcast

The project underwent Faculty Ethical approval.

04.What is a podcast?

An audio transcription of information that can be downloaded and played anywhere and anytime.

Main features:

1. **Simple technology** to generate podcasts: mobile phones or tablets and easily accessible software
2. Easily **downloadable** on smartphones
3. Engaging in **innovative** content (topics/series)
4. **Portable**, as on smartphones, and therefore very accessible

05. How podcasts in HE feature in existing literature

When did the use of podcasting in HE emerge?

1. Growing popularity of podcasts in Higher Education since early 2000s
2. Internet-based education technologies have seen great development in the last 10-15 years
3. Rapid evolution of easy technology to listen to and develop podcasts (a smartphone and an app)
4. Flexibility for students to learn

How could podcasts be used in education?

1. To introduce a new topic (pre-sessions) or review/consolidate an old one
2. To supplement/enrich traditional learning styles
3. To be used as an active learning tool (embedded in other engaging activities)
4. To involve and record conversations with guests (regardless of where they physically are)
5. To encourage students to produce their own podcasts (as an assessment, it is not much common yet)

What disadvantages/risks?

1. Solitary learning experience and passive learning (no opportunity to ask questions and/or receive feedback)
2. Students seeing podcasting as form of entertainment and not education

06. Important features for a successful podcast

Based on reviewing a series of podcasts on planning/design/architecture (e.g. Bartlett Planning Podcasts, 50 Shades of Planning, Isn't That Spatial, The Planning Brief) and the workshop with students, the key features of an engaging podcast in HE are:

- **Length:** 15-20 minutes to engage with audience and their attention
- **High quality recording:** clear audio and negligible background noise
- **Well-defined structure**:
    1. An introduction with key elements of the podcast, i.e. topics, professional/academic guests
    2. Pre-arranged topics to discuss with all participants, but not script-reading
- **Definition of a distinctive style:** e.g. open and conversational or more formal with questions and answers
- **Interactivity** to increase active engagement with the podcast (e.g. involving audience to raise questions or link episodes to students' activities/projects)

07. How podcasts fit in the student learning experience

Workshop with final year Property Development and Planning students held on the 24 August 2020:

"*Innovative, podcasts hadn't been a feature of Uni assessments prior to this module. Using podcasts did offer some unique challenges in terms of structure, flow, and line of questioning. However, I did value this, because if the assessment was another bog standard "write an essay with an intro, research, findings, etc", I don't think I'd have engaged with the topic or material anywhere near as in-depth*"

"*[Podcasting] is new but familiar as everyone has had conversations before! It was not intimidating. Working on a podcast allowed not to focus on word count. It felt it allowed us to go more in depth into a chosen topic, as there was no concern over words count. It was also less fragmented compared to work on a (group) assignment like an essay*"

"*It felt natural in terms of how the conversation flowed, and whilst we were working to a time limit, it definitely gave the chance to explore the topic*"

"*It is very important to choose a topic as it allows you to feel more passionate about*"

08.How to produce a podcast

Identified three major stages in the production of a podcast. We looked to using low tech solutions such as a phone or a laptop, easily available to academics and students. Software-wise, we looked to Anchor app as a recording, editing and dissemination tool, for it is free to use and available on both mobile and desktop.

Pre-recording

- Decide on format and method of recording.

- Provide a skeleton structure and nominate a host.

- Download and install latest software and register as required.

Recording

- Make sure you have suitable hardware and internet connection.

- Make sure you have suitable environment to record.

- Do not be afraid to make mistakes as you can edit those.

Editing and Dissemination

- You can edit different types of raw audio files using Anchor and add sound effects.

- You can re-record segments.

- You can download the final edit, or disseminate on online podcast hosting platforms.

09.How to record a podcast

Tested three different workflows suitable in the academic context.

Face to face recording ☐ ✕

Suitable if recording alone, or in person with others.

- Make sure to record in a suitable environment.
- Use the main functionality of the app and flag any bits to re-edit.
- Easiest format to achieve, but dependent on physical attendance.

Remote voice ☐ ✕

Suitable if recording on the go, remotely or with someone who cannot physically attend

- Use Anchor's remote recording functionality to invite participants.
- Best for single guest.
- Highly dependent on skilled host and pre-recording arrangements.

Remote video and voice ☐ ✕

Suitable if recording remotely or with someone who cannot physically attend

- Recommended option, as visual contact maintained.
- Best for multiple guests.
- Use the sound file from Zoom or Teams to edit into podcast.

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10. How to publish and disseminate an episode of a podcast

1. Use the Anchor app to distribute online
- Once you finished editing, click publish button. This will publish the episode online at all major podcasting platforms such as Google Sounds and Apple Podcasts
- It will also generate a public link that you can share with students via Moodle.

2. Using the Anchor in-browser option to generate audio file
- Once you have finished editing, click publish button and download episode. This will download a published episode as a standalone audio file.
- Upload the audio file to Moodle for students to listen to your podcast episode.

3. Using the original audio file
- Upload the audio file from Zoom to Moodle for students to listen to your podcast episode

11.Conclusion

1. Growing popularity of podcasts also in Higher Education

2. Easy and accessible technology

3. Importance of identified features

4. Students' voices: *'it allows passion to come through' 'power of voice' 'less anxiety for words limit', 'on the go/innovative/novel assessment'*

5. Opportunity to create Open Sources across academic communities

6. Teaching and Learning: easy to develop 'in house' podcasts - How to use them as an effective assessment tool still needs further research

12.Contact details

- If interested in knowing more about the use of podcast in teaching and learning and assessing students or discussing further opportunities to collaborate
- Or if you want to listen to one of the podcast episodes "Drivers of Change" we develop as a result of this project,

    please get in touch and email me: silvia.gullino@bcu.ac.uk

13.Main references

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Appendix

From recording to publishing an episode in detail

a How to record a podcast
b The recording and editing an episode
c How to publish an episode of a podcast

a How to record a podcast

This section is intended as a guide for novice podcast producers. It is specifically providing an overview of how to quickly record and publish a podcast of moderate length (15-20min) using mobile and desktop applications. It explains how to easily record a podcast by suggesting the use of simple technology (Anchor App) and three different recording options: one recording occurring face-to-face between the host and guests (option 1) and two based on remote recording (option 2 and 3).

Useful websites:
https://anchor.fm/
https://medium.com/swlh/5-tips-to-make-your-home-bound-podcast-as-good-as-the-real-deal-348594087438

Suggested technology to record

a. a **smart phone and/or laptop**

b. **Software:** Producing podcasts does not need be a challenging prospect and should not require an extensive understanding of software and the purchase of high-end hardware. Here we focus on two main workflows – a mobile, on the go way of recording podcasts, utilising mobile phone apps and an alternative, utilising platforms familiar to academic users such as Teams/Zoom. Professional podcast producers tend to use digital audio workstations (DAW) to record, edit and produce audio files, however, some mobile apps provide a simplified version which would be perfectly suitable for the novice podcaster. We suggest using the app Anchor, freely available on the Apple App Store and Android devices, due to its simple functionality, ability to record live, edit and produce podcasts, as well as, ability to invite external members to record podcasts remotely. Anchor is freely available on the Apple App Store and Android devices, as well as in-browser version. It is easy to use, therefore recommended for people new to podcasting: simple functionality, possibility to record live (also remotely), edit and produce podcasts.

c. **Microphone:** a 3.5 mm lapel microphone or a USB Microphone are inexpensive to purchase and simple to use. To start with, and test technology, a built-in microphone is usually of sufficient quality.

Pre-recording

- Download and install the latest version of Anchor, which is available via Android and Apple devices and via an in-browser app.
- Register an account and make sure you are familiar with the interface. Anchor provides a good overview for novices on: https://anchor.fm/how-to-start-a-podcast
- Decide the format your podcast will take, for example: nominate a host (if more than one person recording) and create a bullet point list and a skeleton structure of the topics that you would want to cover, plan the general flow of the podcast in terms of timings and topics to be covered. Circulate the draft structure to participants in good time before the recording.
- Book suitable rooms and time. Make sure that background noise is minimised. Allow for some time in the recording for technology testing and housekeeping before you begin the recording.

b The recording and editing an episode

- As general rules, we recommend you take your time while recording the raw audio files, as those can be edited later, but also to embrace the more informal and conversational nature of podcasts. Following a pre-set structure can help easy any nerves and allow for one-take recordings. Depending on your circumstance, one of the three options below will prove most suitable.

Option1: Recording in face to face scenarios using Anchor. This option is suitable for on-campus recording with colleagues and students.

- To record using the Anchor app, click **Tools** or if using the in-browser version click **Create a new episode**
- Press the red microphone button to start recording

Tips:

- Find a quiet location to record from.
- At any point you can stop the recording and resume it.
- While you record, Anchor provides you with the option to add a flag, which can later help you to find and edit the sections of the audio file.
- Stopping the recording using the red button, will allow you to 'Preview your audio'. Stopping and saving the recording will generate the raw audio file.
- To edit the recording click **Tools**. From here, you have the ability to edit the raw audio files that you recorded in a simple manner. You can navigate and add audio segments to the podcast. You can also add interludes, sounds and songs. You can edit episodes both in the mobile app and desktop version.
- You can re-arrange segments in a preferred order. Edits once made can be saved by pressing the 'save changes' button. The episode is then saved as a draft.

Option 2: Recording remotely using Anchor. This option is suitable for recordings on the go, using mobile and engaging, ideally, no more than two participants.

- Anchor allows multiple participants to record podcast episodes remotely through a collaborative link. This is useful when face-to-face recording is not possible (e.g. your guests are in different locations). Click on Tools and on the 'Invite friends to join' option to generate a link, which can be sent to multiple guests (via email or social media). Please note that as soon as invited guests click on the link, they access the recording session.

Note:

- The recording screen will automatically activate when participants join the call through the link. **You cannot pause it** but do not be alarmed as you can always crop bits of audio segments.
- The link can be accessed by people who do not have the app installed, making it easier to invite external members to record with you.
- This modality of recording, particularly useful in outdoor settings, is more complex. Participants in the recording (both host and guests) do not see each other and therefore it is not possible to read other people's body language and the type of communication can be affected. Good structure and clear nominated host are vital for smooth recording.

Tips:

- Once you are in the Anchor remote recording, you must make sure to not leave it as this will cancel the recording.
- As long as the link is live, you as the host can use it to start a recording again and again. If the call drops or you leave by accident, make sure to reuse the same link again to record new segments.
- Anchor will also allow you to send a link for external participant to record a voice message, allowing an asynchronous workflow, if you are unable to record live. This option is available at the tool section, swiping right.
- Once the recording is left by all participants, Anchor will process the audio in the cloud and save it as a raw file in your drafts. Make sure you have good internet connection throughout.
- To edit the recording click **Tools**. From here, you have the ability to edit the raw audio files that you recorded in a simple manner. You can navigate and add audio segments to the podcast. You can also add interludes, sounds and songs. You can edit episodes both in the mobile app and desktop version.
- You can re-arrange segments in a preferred order. Edits once made can be saved by pressing the 'save changes' button. The episode is then saved as a draft.

Option 3: Recording remotely using Zoom/Teams. This option is preferable if there are multiple guests or face-to-face coordination is required.

If a podcast can only be developed remotely, it is preferable to produce a podcast from a MS Teams or Zoom recording. Using Teams/Zoom has a number of advantages including the ability to be able to see the other participants, and therefore providing useful visual cues. Teams/Zoom are also a well-established platform in the post-COVID19 landscape and participants are familiar with its functionality.

Tips:
- Download and install the latest version of Zoom. Zoom is available via Android and Apple devices and via an in-browser app .
- Register an account for free. This will allow up to 40 min of free recording.
- Share the Zoom link and password with podcast guests.
- If you are recording remotely with more than one other person, we recommend the use the desktop applications such as Teams/Zoom, as visual cues may enhance the quality of an audio recording.

- Once all guests have joined the Zoom chat, press record.
- Teams will upload video files in Stream or the Chat so you will need to download those separately. Zoom will provide you with the option to download the audio file after the recording has finished. In both cases makes sure to have stable internet connection. One generated, you can upload the raw audio or video file in Anchor.
- To edit the recording click **Tools**. From here, you have the ability to edit the raw audio files that you recorded in a simple manner. You can navigate and add audio segments to the podcast. You can also add interludes, sounds and songs. You can edit episodes both in the mobile app and desktop version.
- You can re-arrange segments in a preferred order. Edits once made can be saved by pressing the 'save changes' button. The episode is then saved as a draft.

c How to publish an episode of a podcast

Publishing your podcast episode and sharing with students:

1. Using the Anchor app to distribute online
- Once you finished editing, click **publish button**. This will publish the episode online at all major podcasting platforms such as Google Sounds and Apple Podcasts
- It will also generate a public link that you can share with students via Moodle.
- You can curate your episodes online using the Anchor app and adding supplementary data.

2. Using the Anchor in-browser option to generate audio file
- Once you have finished editing, click **publish button and download episode**. This will download a published episode as a standalone audio file.
- Upload the audio file to Moodle for students to listen to your podcast episode. Tip: If you are only using anchor to produce your episode, but you don't want it to be publicly available, after downloading either unpublish or delete it from the online directory.

3. Using the original audio file
- Upload the audio file from Zoom to Moodle for students to listen to your podcast episode