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Podcasts as a tool to engage broader audiences

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Introduction

This paper examines how audio podcasts can be deployed by universities and other educational institutions to engage with a broader range of audiences and encourage critical discussion of contemporary issues. Using the case study of a podcast I produced, I consider how the medium is an accessible and user-friendly format that enables the generation of content aimed at a general listenership. Insight into how this approach can bring teaching and research materials to new groups of people is created by reflecting on the process of making and distributing a series (Hacker 2017).   Since their emergence in the early 2000s, podcasts - as a form of internet on-demand radio – have been used by universities as an additional dissemination system. Departments and universities were early adaptors to help spread knowledge, research findings, and commentary on topics of public interest (Open Culture 2006). One of the main deployments has been to augment student learning through the recording of podcasts as an alternative or supplement to lectures or as a revision or feedback tool (Fernandez et al. 2015; Kidd 2011; Lonn and Teasley 2009). More recently, within the discipline of geography, podcasts are being recognised as a distinct tools for more inclusive research that can reach groups who do not usually follow academic discourses (Kinkaid, Brain, and Senanayake 2019). Building on these strands, this paper focuses on how a podcast can be used as an educational mechanism both for general audiences and undergraduates, which recognises diverse forms of learning and the importance of accessible materials (Ambrose et al. 2010; Towler, Ridgway, and McCarthy 2015).

Figure 1: The podcast series branding

Method

In 2019, I produced a podcast series which was designed to be both of interest and easily listened to by a broad range of people. *Littoral Space* was a fourteen part series that examined a range of social, cultural, and environmental themes by interviewing people who had experiences or expertise in different areas (Scriven 2019). This approach aligned with the increasing popularity of the medium as an information and entertainment source and a format that most people can listen to via their phones/personal devices/pcs. Social media, existing networks, and course webpages were used to promote the series and highlight the issues being addressed.

The content was crafted as a conversational approach to larger, complex themes which were made more understandable through a non-formal style using questions and answers. This intentionally drew on pedagogical theories that valued different learning capacities and the potential of diverse teaching tools, such as the use of sound and the flexibility of an educational artefact students or others could listen (and re-listen) to in their own time (see Towler, Ridgway, and McCarthy 2015). The approach aligned with Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which encourages 'flexibility in the ways information is provided, in the ways students respond or demonstrate knowledge and skills, and in the ways students are engaged' (Universal Design for Learning 2016, p.8). In addition, podcasts can foster learning and dissemination by enhancing the existing interests and knowledge of the audiences and motivating them to engage with topics; these features are increasingly being recognised within higher education as important to learners becoming active agents in their own education (Ambrose et al. 2010; Wiske 2005). A growing significance of public engagement in institutional and funding strategies combined with pedagogies that demand

greater creativity and accessibility underline the opportunities presented in harnessing podcasting's capacities. The paper outlines how these different priorities were manifested in the podcast series and its reception.

Findings

My findings centre on observations from making the podcast series, feedback from participants, and responses received from listeners, which are gathered to highlight the potential of podcasts as teaching and learning, and research dissemination processes. For general audiences the format was easily accessed and provided a clear and versatile means of outlining contemporary themes in an informed and concise manner – one of the key goals of public engagement. Students appreciated the podcast as a more dynamic tool amongst the range of items on the course 'reading' list, such as academic journal articles and policy papers; it offered a practical and focused examination of different topics.

At time of submission the series has a cumulative total of 1,849 listens from student and public audiences indicating a clear interest for this type of intervention. It allowed for complex issues, such as the asylum process in Ireland or sustainable farming, to be explained using everyday language in a focused and concise product. The medium, however, has inherent challenges from technical requirements to the time commitments involved. The paper shows how the format can be adopted in universities and used alongside other teaching and publishing streams by outlining the process and the type of content it fosters. Moreover, insights gain in the production of the podcast help locate this approach in larger disciplinary and pedagogical contexts as an approach that can convey information about contemporary topics – such as climate change, sustainable development, and migration – in a practical and inclusive way.

Conclusions

The paper highlights the potential of podcasts as a tool for universities to reach broader audiences in an accessible form that builds on existing interest and technological advances. It illustrates how the format can be used by individual scholars/educators or institutions to make key messages or research findings available to both students and the public. Using the popularity of the medium, and the interest and need for informed discussion of contemporary issues, podcasting can form an impactful strand of universities community engagement programmes. Further research needs to consider the impact of podcasts as a

complimentary dissemination tool and produce baseline data on listenerships and marketing approaches.

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