AUTHOR	Hoegaerts Josephine, Wuokko Maiju
TITLE	Podcasts as student assignments: experiences and insights
YEAR	2022
DOI	
VERSION	Publisher's PDF
CITATION	Josephine Hoegaerts, Maiju Wuokko (2022). Podcasts as student assignments: experiences and insights. Yliopistopedagogiikka 29(1). https://lehti.yliopistopedagogiikka.fi/2022/08/22/podcasts-as-student-assignments-experiences-and-insights/

Podcasts as student assignments: Experiences and insights

22.8.2022

tags: podcast, student assignment

Josephine Hoegaerts, *Eurooppa-tutkimuksen apulaisprofessori, Helsingin yliopisto*
josephine.hoegaerts@helsinki.fi (mailto:josephine.hoegaerts@helsinki.fi)

Maiju Wuokko, *poliittisen historian yliopisto-opettaja, Turun yliopisto*
maiju.wuokko@utu.fi (mailto:maiju.wuokko@utu.fi)

KEHITTÄMINEN JA KOKEILUT

(https://yliopistopedagogiikka.files.wordpress.com/2022/08/yp-osastotunnus-kehittaminen-ja-kokeilut_page_013-2.png)

This article examines the use of podcasts as student assignments in higher education. We present practical experiences from two courses, and reflect upon them from the perspective of critical sound studies. While detailed instructions and careful scaffolding are necessary when setting an audio assignment, it is not the technicalities that require the most attention. Instead, we suggest that both teachers and students can acquire new scholarly skills by approaching podcasts with analytical scrutiny similar to that applied to written texts.

Introduction

Podcasts have proliferated in the last few years (e.g. Spinelli & Dann, 2019). As this new form of audio is becoming big business, it is also turning into an increasingly important source of information and entertainment. Podcasts can also serve as an important tool in the arsenal employed by scholars, teachers and students alike in order to learn, think and communicate, provided that we learn to use them well.

We propose that experiments with the podcast format can provide students with skills for analysis, storytelling and reflection. We base our suggestions on our own practical experiences in assigning the production of an 'audio document', such as a podcast or audio paper (Schulze, 2016), and on insights gleaned from scholarship in sound studies. This paper is therefore not just a contribution to the modest but growing field of pedagogical approaches to using podcasts in teaching (see e.g. Andersen & Dau, 2021; Besser, Blackwell & Saenz, 2022; Prince, 2020). Added to this, we suggest that encouraging students to create audio documents themselves can help them adopt a critical stance toward genres like the podcast, think through issues of 'voice' in scholarly expression, and develop their ability to discuss and reflect on content.

With these goals in mind, the two examples we present here pay limited attention to audio technology and editing skills. Instead, we focus on how building a podcast episode or audio document requires narrative structure, careful thought about the cultural work of sounds and voices, and an understanding of knowledge and scholarship as a conversational practice.

Audio assignment with a focus on the learning experience

Our first example is a course titled 'Finland in northern European contemporary history', arranged yearly at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Turku. The course introduces exchange students to Finnish history since 1809. The history of Finland is not a key component of any participant's major studies, and a command of the subject matter is an unusually low priority. The audio assignment was introduced in the 2021 edition of the course with the goal of allowing students to practice a skill that might be relevant later on in their studies or working life. Regarding content, the focus of the assignment was on the students' reflections on their own learning experience and dialogue; they recorded the assignment in pairs.

The teacher explained the audio assignment during the first class. In addition, the Moodle learning platform featured an instructional video, a discussion forum for questions about technical issues, and further sources introducing the basics of audio editing. However, the students were not required to edit their audio, as long as the recording ran reasonably smoothly and without excessive echo or background noise. The use of a studio was not expected but suitable locations at home (e.g. sauna, walk-in closet) were recommended. The students could use the built-in recorder on their smartphone or an application such as Audacity or Zoom on their laptop to make the recording.

Instead of polished audio quality, the students were expected to focus on discussing the insights they had gained from the course, similarities and differences between the history of their home country and Finland, and topics they would have liked to learn more about. They were supposed to plan the recording in advance, write a loose script outlining key points, and create a clear structure for their recording. Reading from a script was discouraged, however, and the students were advised to aim for as easy-flowing a dialogue as possible. Both partners were supposed to spend approximately the same amount of time speaking. The length of each recording was 15–20 minutes, and they were to be submitted via Moodle as mp3 files. A holistic rubric was created for assessing the assignment (accessible at **https://blogs.helsinki.fi/podcourse/files/2022/03/Fnech_audio_assignment_assessment_rubric.pdf (https://blogs.helsinki.fi/podcourse/files/2022/03/Fnech_audio_assignment_assessment_rubric.pdf)**). The criteria emphasized content, reflection and dialogue, but attention was also paid to whether the recording was enjoyable to listen to, whether necessary editing had been carried out, and whether the students had been able to stay within the time limit.

The students considered the audio assignment more innovative than written assignments, and their excitement was reflected in the recordings, which contained insightful dialogue, and even debate at times between students from different backgrounds. Some students had chosen to frame their discussion creatively, for example as greetings to their friends and families back home, as an episode of a podcast series dealing with the experiences of exchange students in Finland, or as a discussion between fellow students who were revising the key course content while waiting for an imaginary final exam to begin. The students' efforts made the audio assignments a rewarding listen for the teacher, too. Grading the assignments was illuminating and moving – both figuratively and literally – because it was possible to listen to them while taking a walk in the forest.

Podcast assignment in a sound studies context

Our second example, drawn from a course on Sound Studies Methods for cultural studies students, organized at the University of Helsinki's Department of Cultures in 2020, was more specifically sound-centered. Over the course of eight weeks, students developed one podcast episode through weekly assignments, accompanied by theoretical discussions on the cultural practice of listening, the historically contingent meaning of voice, and the development of audio technology. Through group work and sustained peer feedback, students practiced building audio narratives, compared the effects of scripted and improvised speech, reflected on the power balance in interviews, and learned to include non-vocal sound elements in their narratives. (Overview of the assignments: **https://blogs.helsinki.fi/podcourse/sample-page/ (https://blogs.helsinki.fi/podcourse/sample-page/)**.) Their final assignment entailed creating a brief podcast episode communicating aspects of their own research to a broad audience, explicitly using sound as a medium. The grading rubric (accessible at **https://blogs.helsinki.fi/podcourse/files/2022/03/Matrix-podcasting-assignment.pdf (https://blogs.helsinki.fi/podcourse/files/2022/03/Matrix-podcasting-assignment.pdf)**) reflected the need to understand the cultural impact of sound both theoretically and practically, as well as requirements with regard to a clear and accessible narrative and narrative structures.

Although demands regarding technical proficiency and equipment were deliberately minimized on this course too, encouraging students to think explicitly and analytically about sound led them to pay particular attention to the role of sound in building a narrative and arguments. As a result, a number of students on the course took the opportunity to become familiar with the university's recording studio or to experiment with musical content and sound effects.

More importantly, repeated discussion of and engagement with ideas about 'voice' and its entanglement with power led students to think very carefully about intellectual transparency and honesty. Instead of struggling with the technicalities of footnotes and bibliographies, they carefully thought through innovative ways to credit the scholars or informants they referred to in their narratives, and learned to distinguish sharply between reference, paraphrase and citation. In doing so, they developed strong standards about ethical scholarship and an understanding of research as a 'conversational' practice – something that quite literally requires many voices, and a willingness to listen carefully and critically, as well as an ability to speak clearly. In line with the experiences outlined above, this also resulted in audio documents that very explicitly reflected students' personal interests and approaches, encouraging a grading practice based more on careful listening and less on 'checking' technical or formal requirements.

Conclusion: Developing sonic skills

A podcasting assignment can fulfill a number of the functions we generally ascribe to essay assignments: it allows students to practice their skills in presenting content in a logical and organized fashion; encourages them to think explicitly about the transparency of research and intellectual honesty; and provides them with an opportunity to display their mastery of a subject and their ability to discuss aspects of it in an original manner. In addition to that, such an assignment calls for the acquisition of new skills, like editing or oral narration. This means that setting a podcasting assignment necessitates careful scaffolding, and clarity on the part of the instructor with regard to the main goal of the assignment.

In both of our examples, the primary goal was not to develop students' audio-technology skills beyond a very basic level, but rather to teach them new ways to present and reflect on content. In order to reach that goal, we set flexible but clearly defined limits on the length of the assignment; defined several categories of assessment around argument-building and oral presentation; and provided students with practical resources to support them with the technical challenges built into the assignment. Doing so allowed them to feel confident about an unfamiliar mode of learning. It also created an environment in which both students and teachers cultivated an awareness of the cultural work that occurs in oral communication, which often flies under the radar.

This notion of the cultural 'work' performed by voices and sounds rests on the insights of sound studies scholars (Morat & Ziemer, 2018; Novak & Sakakeeny, 2015; Sterne, 2003). Sounds and their reception do not occur in a social or cultural vacuum. In other words, the way we hear and the way sounds have meaning is bound up with our culturally shaped expectations of the world. This is, perhaps, particularly true for the human voice, which is strongly associated with personality, or an 'authentic' self, but is in fact a carefully learned and maintained practice. We all learn how to speak in particular contexts, surrounded by norms and ideas of how we should behave and what we should sound like – norms and ideas that differ by gender, age, class, ethnicity, and even the particular role we play professionally or socially (Hoegaerts, 2021).

Audio media have a long and complicated history of mobilizing the cultural capacities of sound and voice, and whilst they only rarely consciously try to 'fool' their audience, the apparent immediacy of the disembodied recorded voice very often has the effect of suggesting an immediacy and authenticity we would do well to question (Goodale, 2011). Encouraging students to 'use their voice' as part of an audio assignment, we argue, requires teachers to develop the kind of analytical scrutiny we usually reserve for written texts. It also provides students with an excellent opportunity to gain practical experience of the constructed nature of sound and voice, and is a strong reminder of the 'mediated' nature of all information, including scholarly content.

References

Andersen, R. H. & Dau, S. (2021). A review of podcasts as a learning medium in higher education. In C. Busch, M. Steinicke, R. Frieß & T. Wendler (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 20th European Conference on e-Learning: A virtual conference hosted by University of Applied Sciences HTW, Berlin, Germany 28-29 October 2021* (pp. 34–41). Reading: ACIL.

Besser, E. D., Blackwell, L. E. & Saenz, M. (2022). Engaging students through educational podcasting: Three stories of implementation. *Technology, Knowledge and Learning, 27*(3), 749–764. **https://doi.org/10.1007/s10758-021-09503-8 (https://doi.org/10.1007/s10758-021-09503-8)**

Goodale, G. (2011). *Sonic persuasion: Reading sound in the recorded age*. Studies in Sensory History. Baltimore: University of Illinois Press.

Hoegaerts, J. (2021). Voices that matter? Methods for historians attending to the voices of the past. *Historical Reflections, 47*(1), 113–137. **https://doi.org/10.3167/hrrh.2021.470106 (https://doi.org/10.3167/hrrh.2021.470106)**

Morat, D. & Ziemer, H. (Eds.) (2018). *Handbuch Sound: Geschichte – Begriffe – Ansätze*. Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler. **https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-05421-0 (https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-476-05421-0)**

Novak, D. & Sakakeeny, M. (Eds.) (2015). *Keywords in sound*. Durham & London: Duke University Press. **https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375494 (https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822375494)**

Prince, B. F. (2020). Podcasts: The potential and possibilities. *Teaching Sociology*, *48*(4), 269–271. **https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X20959837 (https://doi.org/10.1177/0092055X20959837)**

Schulze, H. (2016, September 6). What is an Audio Paper? *Sound Studies Lab*. **http://www.soundstudieslab.org/what-is-an-audio-paper/ (http://www.soundstudieslab.org/what-is-an-audio-paper/)**

Spinelli, M. & Dann, L. (2019). *Podcasting: The audio media revolution*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

Sterne, J. (2003). *The audible past: Cultural origins of sound reproduction*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.

from → Uncategorized, Yliopistopedagogiikka 2022/1

No comments yet
This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. Learn how your comment data is processed.

Pidä blogia WordPress.comissa.