

Spark: UAL Creative Teaching and Learning Journal

Talking higher education: starting a podcast during the pandemic

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Abstract

This short case study tells the story from my lived experience, of why and how I set up a higher education podcast during the pandemic, and its potential application to arts education. A podcast is an episodic series of digital audio or video files that anyone can download and play at a time of their choosing. People have been making and listening to podcasts since the early 2000s. I had observed that despite there being many education podcasts, they were either based in the US or only educational technology-focused, therefore not bringing in very different perspectives on higher education. I spotted an opportunity in this space to give people in and out of higher education a better shared understanding of the sector. This became the key purpose of the ensuing *Talking Higher Education (TalkingHE)* podcast.

Keywords

podcast; pandemic; educational development; higher education

The potential of podcasting for arts education

The potential of podcasting in arts education is significant and has been for over a decade. The podcast itself might be seen as a creative expression. The nature of arts education often lends itself to usage of different media, and demonstrating techniques lends itself to having either audio or video files being produced where arts practitioners can be interviewed or demonstrate a technique which is relevant to the topic taught (On Tam, 2012). This potentially creates a rich mixture of media that can bring topics to life, therefore engaging a wider range of students, which might in turn, improve student experience.

Rationale

The idea for the *TalkingHE* podcast came about via an exchange on the social media platform Twitter, following a #LTHEChat (Learning and Teaching in Higher Education) Twitter chat. The #LTHEChat is a regular tweetchat (Middleton and Spiers, 2019; Vasant 2019) that happens on Twitter between 8–9pm on Wednesdays during term time. Through the direct messaging feature on Twitter, several educational developers discussed an idea for a podcast, with initial assistance from Brian Hopkin (former Director of Student Services at the University of East London) and Dr Emily McIntosh (the Director of the Centre for Academic Practice and Enhancement at Middlesex University).

The reason for producing a podcast for UK higher education produced by and for those working in and alongside higher education was to give a voice to the many groups that are underrepresented in the sector. We wanted the community to hear topics and perspectives that it might not ordinarily hear, due to the departmental, disciplinary and institutional silos that exist. Hence the podcast was born!

Communicating with the community

I ran a short survey in mid-October 2020 for 4 weeks via various Jisc mailing lists and on Twitter to seek the community's opinion on how it should operate. I used a Google Form to do this, with just one question asked, along with a free text response box. The response was positive. 34 respondents offered suggestions and volunteers for being podcast guests. The questions and results from the survey are summarised below.

Podcast pilot topics:

- Engaging with students who haven't been in education for 6 months or longer
- How are you getting on with assessment and feedback?
- Mental health in higher education
- Teaching during a pandemic
- What impact has the 'digital divide' had in your institution on students' response to going fully online?
- Other:
- Any further comments or suggestions?

In total we received 55 anonymous responses from the higher education community with the survey closing in December 2020.

The top three topics were:

- Teaching during a pandemic
- How are you getting on with assessment and feedback?
- What impact has the 'digital divide' had in your institution on students' response to going fully online?

I began contacting potential guests with expertise in these areas, and subsequently recorded the first four episodes:

- Kate Lindsay on 'Challenges to Online Learning'
- Professor Sally Brown and Professor Kay Sambell on 'Assessment and Feedback'
- Kulvir Bahra on 'The Digital Divide'
- Professor Chris Headleand on 'Teaching in a Pandemic'.

These were the questions asked in the first episode to Kate Lindsay, Head of Digital Education at the University College of Estates Management (UCEM) –

- What do you see as the challenges to online learning?
- What would you say to those that say you can't teach your subject area online?
- How do staff teach modules at UCEM?

Experiences of the initial recordings

Much of my communication with guests for the podcast was through Twitter in the initial stages, using the direct messaging feature. This was where most of my potential guests regularly exchanged their views on higher education. Typically, we would briefly discuss the theme, as well as agreeing a recording date and time.

The questions would often arise from an exchange via email or a Twitter direct message between myself as host and the guest. Depending on the topic, I might ask an impromptu follow-up question, along the lines of 'so why do you think that is?' or similar. This is because I'm interested in the topic or I believe the listener might benefit from further insights.

The podcast might be considered similar to a semi-structured interview in qualitative research. By taking part, the guests were consenting to being recorded, edited and having their episode freely available on the Anchor.fm platform. If there was anything they would like me not to ask them or mention, they would let me know. This was very rare and only happened with the sharing of yet-to-be-published research for example.

I interviewed the first four guests for the first four months in December 2020, as I initially wanted to see how the first four episodes would be received, before continuing. I wanted a mixture of established and less established guests on the podcast, something I have continued to be aware of when approaching guests. I interviewed Kate Lindsay (University College of Estate Management), Professors Sally Brown and Kay Sambell (independent consultants), Kulvir Bahra (Warwick Business School) and Professor Chris Headleand (Staffordshire University).

I arranged a Microsoft Teams call with the guest(s) at a suitable time. Initially, I thought I would save bandwidth and have a better quality recording if the guests and myself had our videos off during the podcast recording. However, we found in some cases, that the episodes were a little flat in energy when I came to edit them. This was because we couldn't see each other, so non-verbal cues couldn't be read and we couldn't spark off each other. Therefore I decided to insist on the guest(s) have their cameras on during the recording. I use a Rode USB microphone with a pop shield. The recordings are downloaded, and only the audio is saved. This has given the episodes a more natural feel.

Production of the podcast

Feedback has been very positive since I started and is a motivator for me to continue to record an episode each month, as I know people look forward to new episodes. Here is a selection of feedback received from the community:

I run the PgCert APHE for my institution and have shared your podcasts with participants as wider development activities. Feedback from them shows they value mobile and audio learning just as much as I do, and they find topics pertinent to their current context. Thought it'd be nice to share the positive insights with you. (Brinder Rajpal, Coventry University)

One of the contributors Jennie Blake (Head of Teaching and Learning Development at the University of Manchester) wrote on Twitter,

This was so much fun! It was lovely to have a chance to ramble on about students, libraries and other third spaces. Would love to hear what people think!

Dr Samantha Reed, Learning and Teaching Manager for Nottingham Business School wrote on Twitter,

Really enjoyed hearing more about the @NTRepository in this episode of the @TalkingHEpod podcast which I have recently discovered. Looking forward to finding and hopefully contributing some creative teaching and learning ideas soon.

Simon Thomson (Director of the University of Liverpool's Centre for Innovation in Education) wrote on Twitter,

Love that podcast. It's also one reason we developed our Spotlight Guides @LivUniCIE as a digestible way for academic colleagues to understand learning and teaching approaches.

Simon's point echoes one of the main reasons to create the podcast, to support staff across higher education to understand learning and teaching approaches in a digestible way, rather than focussing solely on written academic texts.

I have been surprised where and how listeners use the podcast. People listen to it on their morning commutes, runs or walks. Members of the educational development community who run PgCerts, also use recommend certain episodes to their PgCert students. The most popular one has been the episode on assessment with Professors Sally Brown and Kay Sambell, which was used by an ex-colleague as part of a course leader development programme at the University of East London.

With just a tweet or two a month via @TalkingHEPod, the audience and the podcast continues to grow in popularity and reach. According to the average listens per episode on Anchor.fm, there are approximately 100 listens per episode, with people listening in from 25 countries across the world, with the UK, US and Ireland as the top three countries.

I plan to continue to promote the podcase further in the coming months to the higher education community on Twitter, LinkedIn and the Jiscmail lists I'm a member of. I'm also considering uploading the episodes so far to the National Teaching Repository, so they can be preserved as artefacts and valuable resources for educators.

Lessons for arts education

I believe that podcasting is another way to communicate knowledge, talk to students through demonstrations and communicate relevant knowledge in a format that is easily digestible for listeners. The accessibility, flexibility and mobile nature of podcasts are key features that appeal to educators (McNamara and Haegele, 2020), as demonstrated by my own experience of feedback from listeners of the *TalkingHE* podcast.

Anyone could take the approaches I have outlined in this article to record their own podcasts for students to listen to, aligning them with the unit they are teaching. A great recent example to develop out of UAL's MA Academic Practice course is *The Illustration Conversation* by Maisie Noble, first year leader of LCC's BA (Hons) Illustration and Visual Media course. Maisie curated and recorded a series of conversations between professional illustrators and illustration graduates about their work. Each participant was asked to create and bring along an image that represented a significant moment on their journey to becoming an illustrator. These images operated not only as elicitation devices for the ensuing conversation, but were also used as the cover images accompanying the podcasts.

The ability to express creativity through podcasting is one of the main reasons arts educators should consider using podcasting for themselves and even potentially as a submission mode for their students. As Maisie's example demonstrates this taps into many skills of communication and creativity, be that in the spoken word, dialogue, poetry or music, to name but a few. I believe this makes podcasting a versatile tool for any educator to have in their toolbox, but especially the arts educator. If you have been inspired to begin podcasting, then there are many resources out there to help you (e.g. University College London, no date). Happy podcasting and listening!

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Biography

Santanu Vasant is Educational Developer, Reward and Recognition, working to support UAL colleagues to attain AdvanceHE Fellowship from Associate to Principal. He is a Principal Fellow of AdvanceHE. He has over 17 years' experience working in higher education in several academic development roles, including leading the University of East London and University of West London Centres for Teaching and Learning. Santanu's area of expertise in academic development is digital education. His research interest is around the intersectionality between learning design, space and technology. Since December 2020 he has run the higher education podcast 'TalkingHE'.