

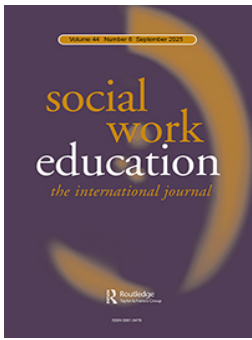
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'We hear not just the words': an evaluation of storytelling using podcasts in social work education

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the effectiveness of using podcasts in social work education to foster student learning and engagement. There is a long tradition of innovation and creativity in the teaching of social work students locally and globally—and an emerging body of international pedagogical research exploring the use of podcasts and storytelling in social work education to which this study contributes. Building on adult learning principles, a series of case studies were co-created by practitioners and academics, working with a professional scriptwriter, and made into six audio podcasts featuring actors taking different perspectives. We evaluated their implementation in a social work education programme at a university in England. Students responded to an online survey which included items related to the accessibility of the podcasts and their experience of engaging with the podcasts on the module. Findings of the study demonstrate the popularity of the approach with students and positive responses in areas of criticality, application and 'real world' learning—all enhancing the pre-placement learning of social work students. The discussion examines possible reasons for this success and looks especially at aspects of adult learning and storytelling—with their potential for public pedagogy, emotional learning, and professional development.

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Introduction

The Covid 19 global pandemic radically disrupted higher education social work programmes which traditionally relied on campus attendance. The immediate impact was a rapid transition to online teaching and learning to sustain programme delivery (Osburn et al., 2023). This shift resulted, in part, in technological innovation within teaching and learning in social work education—impacting in the longer term around the world, including, for example, Australia (Fox et al., 2023) and Italy (Cabiati et al., 2022). Some of these technological developments increased the capacity and ability of social work educators to provide teaching experiences mediated through audio visual platforms—to the extent that some authors argue that there is no longer a debate about whether face-to-face teaching is more effective compared to online learning as this has been

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superseded by how best to deliver online learning and how to make new technology usable and user-friendly for students (Osburn et al., 2023).

Yet, one area that arguably presents the greatest challenges in online learning for social work students—is where it directly relates to and informs practice. This, of course, is not simply an issue of technology. Goldingay et al. (2018) suggests that there are challenges in terms of how to prepare students for social work practice—due to the complex nature of maintaining an anti-oppressive approach underpinned by social work values, within the context of managerialism and neoliberal assumptions. She argues further that even when students arrive in their social work placements with confidence this does not necessarily mean they can easily translate this into social work practice competence. Roulston et al. (2023) found that poor understanding of the social work role was a key factor in students failing their placements, as well as poor application of theory and procedural knowledge in social work practice. Cleak et al., (2023) based on findings from their study of 400 students argue that student learning within pre placement modules would be enhanced by their having more access to real-world learning. It is important, therefore, that pre placement teaching and learning acts as a bridge for students' academic learning to their 'real-world' experiences on placement (Cleak et al., 2023, Goldingay et al., 2018). One way to prepare students for this complexity is via the use of a digital case study—where students engage in authentic online learning experiences within a safe space without causing harm (Goldingay et al., 2018). Digital case studies enable listeners to co-construct mental pictures of meaning by stimulating their memories and imagination—which also supports their cognition and retention (Fox et al., 2023, pp. 405 – 406). Transferring social work practice knowledge itself to the digital space, via podcasting, creates a new pathway for the listener to critically reflect and facilitates deep immersive learning (Fox et al., 2023). Other benefits have been demonstrated in the emerging literature showing, for example, that podcast-based teaching methods have the potential to foster both critical thinking and experiential learning (Ferrer et al., 2020). Furthermore, podcasting can also allow participation and collaborative therapeutic problem-solving with others, allowing people to feel part of a community (López Peláez et al., 2017), and when used in arts based adult education, can stimulate social activism (Wilbur et al., 2022).

Podcasts and social work

The podcast genre itself originates from around 2004, through a fusion of technology and narrative radio broadcasting (Fox et al., 2023). Podcasts are broadly understood to be a series of digital, audio or video files made accessible online to download to a portable media player. But defining them precisely does present some challenges. Rime et al. (2022) examine the issue and conclude that:

A podcast is a piece of episodic, downloadable or streamable, primarily spoken audio content, distributed via the internet, playable anywhere, at any time, produced by anyone who so wishes. (p. 1270)

This 'broad church' medium, together with the combination of increased usage of mobile devices, has fostered the mainstreaming of podcasts and allowed for diversity of materials and broader audience engagement (Ferrer et al., 2020). There are, however, some common trends emerging—overall, in the UK, 90% of podcast

listeners listen alone and two-thirds listen via mobile phone and this 1:1 delivery mode, increases the intimacy factor (Fox et al., 2023). As a result, podcasting provides social work education with a number of options. It could provide a non-formal approach to communicate social work information and deepen the links between research, theory, and practice. It can also help students connect, share ideas, get to know one another, and feel more engaged to the class and its subject matter (Fronek et al., 2016; Guertin, 2010). Podcasting can contribute to a strategy for enhancing student learning and lowering staffing costs in a classroom in transition to digitally enhanced teaching methods (Cartney, 2013). However, we are not aware of any research studies which measure the costs and benefits of using podcasts in social work education.

According to Singer (2019), social work podcasting content has a relatively long history with, for example, a series produced for social work from 2007. Several podcasts have been developed in recent years by social work organizations and individuals. These tend to promote the work of these organizations (e.g. regulators, professional associations) as well as exploring professional practice, research, and knowledge exchange. Singer (2019) suggests that internationally there are over forty social work content podcasts, all of which claim to discuss issues such as diversity, marginalization and decolonization. A social work content podcast has strong potential as a forum for developing and building a trusting relationship between the host, the listener and difficult content and a sense of ‘liveness’ missing from written content (Fox et al., 2023, p. 408).

To give a brief snapshot of the range of the contemporary use of podcasts in social work, we note a handful of examples. Fronek et al. (2016), Ferrer et al. (2020) and Cohen and Singer (2021) all agree on the value of using podcasts in social work education. The Research in Practice (2023) podcasts bring together academic research, practice knowledge, and the experiences of people who use services. Social Work England, produces the podcast: *This Is Social Work* (see reference for links, Social Work England, 2023). The British Association of Social Workers podcast, ‘Let’s Talk Social Work’ (BASW, 2023) is a forum for discussion with other social workers, the people they help and colleagues in relevant fields. They consider the most important concerns impacting social workers and examine current problems locally and globally (<https://basw.co.uk/training-cpd/lets-talk-social-work-podcast>). Social Work Leaders available at (<https://open.spotify.com/show/6uYIw41eK5MwfMn30DqLuD>) offers a range of topics for social work practitioners to engage with, including invited guest interviewees from the sector. Webber’s (2023) podcasts aim to promote dialogue around social work-related research. The European Social Network: talks series (available at: <https://www.esn-eu.org/podcasts>) includes episodes which explore challenges facing social services generally across Europe in the post pandemic context, whilst the European Social Work Research Association have a small number of mixed media presentations and video podcasts about social work research (European Social Work Research Association, 2024).

These examples demonstrate the range of forms that podcasting can take, its ability to service different voices within the profession, and a range of perspectives on social work issues—including research agendas. One element bringing this variety of approaches together is their reliance, at heart, on storytelling. This was an aspect particularly interesting to the authors who looked to examine especially the use of podcasts in social

work education—and saw an opportunity to link the story-telling aspect of podcasting—with case study work in the preparation of students for practice.

Podcasts: case studies for social work education

A series of case studies were developed into a story from three different perspectives, for example, a service user, a carer and a social worker. The podcasts were approximately 20 minutes each and were based on cases that academics and practitioners had worked on. The details of the people involved in the cases were anonymized.

The podcasts were created by a team involving practitioners, academics, a professional scriptwriter, and actors. A technical/production team developed these into six audio podcast episodes. Each case study was co-constructed and based on academic and practitioners' knowledge of working with specific groups of service users, legislation, and theory/methods of social work practice. Each case provides a perspective from three people involved in a typical case, and the podcast listener hears about the situation from these three perspectives. At the end of each podcast an academic and/or practitioner discuss the case study. The reflective discussions were designed to mirror how students are encultured into practice and the associated learning materials were designed to support students learning outcomes for the pre placement modules. Funding for the production and payment of the scriptwriter was provided via the Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF). Students were able to access and listen to the Podcasts throughout the academic year. The podcasts project took approximately 2 years from development to launch and cost approximately £20,000. Whilst this was a substantial initial outlay the Podcasts can be used repeatedly, and the associated learning activities can be differentiated for students at different stages of their course.

The podcasts developed from these case studies were designed to convey rich messages through narratives of realistic situations from within social work practice; specifically aimed for our audience of—both undergraduate and postgraduate social work students prior to their first placement. Shahrizal et al. (2022) discuss how podcasts feed into processes of universal design for learning as students can pause, rewind, and listen to them again at their own pace. The narratives or story telling through the audio podcasts give accessibility for students with a visual impairment and those with a hearing impairment as they are able to utilize the podcast transcripts (Van Petegem et al., 2021; Singer & Cohen, 2021). Any adjustments made for learners with additional needs improve the accessibility and learning for all students (Petegem et al., 2021). Learning can thus be flexible and self-directed while overcoming accessibility barriers (McNamara & Drew, 2019).

Integration of the podcasts into the curriculum

The team felt that as the podcasts were storytelling/narratives of realistic situations within social work practice that they would fit more naturally within the preparation for practice modules. However, this did not preclude them from being used within other parts of the curriculum for example within the law and social justice module. We were conscious that despite having interesting podcasts rich in learning potential—that this may not mean the students will make sense of them in ways that we expect, or experience

learning connected to the curriculum through simply listening to them (Van Petegem et al., 2021, p. 104 – 106). The team integrated the podcasts into the module teaching and learning to support the students to meet the module learning outcomes by utilizing the principles of ‘constructive alignment.’ Biggs (1996, p. 361) explains that principles of constructive alignment mean that the facilitator of learning is clear about not only what students should be learning but what the students need to show to demonstrate their learning at the appropriate level. The facilitator of learning needs to ensure that the learning activities that are student centered with authentic assessment and that is clearly underpinned by this thinking. In this way the learning outcomes, learning activities and assessment are linked and feed into each other. The team developed the podcasts rooted to the learning objectives within the preparation for placement modules. The podcasts acted as a learning situation providing the opportunity for the students to elicit this learning at the appropriate level to meet the learning outcomes while building their own meanings of social work practice. The learning activities within the face-to-face sessions enabled students to provide evidence of their learning. The content of the podcasts with the associated learning activities were directly linked to the module assessments.

Teaching strategies

The podcasts were used within a ‘flipped classroom’ as part of a blended learning approach which involves the use of technologies combined with face-to-face teaching (Merriam & Baumgartner, 2020). The ‘flipped classroom’ is an education technique in which the events that have traditionally taken place in the classroom now take place outside (Holmes et al., 2015, p. 216). The students accessed material about the content traditionally delivered within the lecture, via the podcast, before the live face-to-face teaching session. The face-to-face teaching was used for the students to collectively analyze the material from the podcasts through critical thinking and by applying theoretical concepts through discussion (Bagdasaryan & Huynh-Hohnbaum, 2022). Holmes et al. (2015) argue the ‘flipped classroom’ educational technique enhances student engagement in the face-to-face session by giving space for ‘active learning’ which involves learning activities that are student—student collaborative learning or problem oriented underpinned by constructivist theories of learning.

Merriam and Bierema (2014), explain that constructivism is made up by perspectives which share the belief that learning is how people make sense of their experience, i.e. by students listening to the podcast and are active in construction of meanings from this experience to develop new knowledge. For Merriam and Bierema (2014) the socio-cultural context in which the learners construct learning is very important as it is a process of negotiation and the sharing of meanings with others to develop new knowledge. Thus, the students being situated within a social work education lecture theater becomes the site in which new meanings are shared and evolve. The social construction of knowledge is central to self-directed learning, transformational learning, experiential learning, and reflective practice and ‘the students turn into the knowledge producers with the instructor being a facilitator of their learning’ (Merriam & Bierema, 2014, p. 37).

This approach challenges traditional didactic teaching in which the student is viewed as the ‘container’ or the ‘vessel’ to be filled up by the teacher as they are in a position of

expertise and therefore power (Freire, 2017). When the student becomes the knowledge producer, the power differential between the student and the instructor is reduced. This brings a more equal flow of knowledge, a partnership of knowledge production between the student and the teacher for the future (Fox et al., 2023). In turn this brings us to heutagogy which is part of a teaching-learning continuum, where the learner reflects upon what and why certain content is learned, and educators guide learners in how to learn (Herie, 2013; Kamenetz, 2010; Peters, 2001, 2004). Heutagogical learning environments facilitate the development of capable learners who can respond to complex situations where phenomena are unpredictable, and agents interact in dynamic relationships. Heutagogy emphasizes both the development of learner competencies, as well as the development of the learner's capability and capacity to learn. The relevance of heutagogy for our inquiry is that it moves learners—in this case social work students—from being simply self-directed to being self-determining, a foundational skill for practice (Osburn et al., 2023).

An example of the learning activities aligned to constructivist/heutagogical learning within the live teaching and learning event is from the 'Lottie' podcast package. The students were asked to listen to the podcast before the live teaching and learning event with a pre-set learning activity. The students would experience, through listening to the podcast, the potential issues, and points of view from the different perspectives of the three speakers. Within the live teaching and learning event the students were asked to 'mind map' in groups or pairs, themes that were directly linked to the learning outcomes and related to professional practice. This learning activity involved negotiated discussion and the sharing of meanings from their experiences of listening to the podcast between the group members which was recorded on a mind map. The students were asked to feedback their mind map to others to bring wider meaning sharing to develop new knowledge. The students were then asked to reflect and identify gaps in their learning with actions to address these learning gaps ahead of placement. The students were asked to evaluate their experiences of utilizing podcasts within their learning within the live teaching learning event.

Before we report on the evaluation of this project, we wished to make a note about the importance of understanding the different voices that these activities 'hear.' The scriptwriter/director worked with the case study team to give voice to the people involved in the case, the service user, other family members and professionals. The scriptwriter/director was able to listen to the recording of the reflective discussions when writing the scripts for each case study and this provided depth and context when looking to explore and express the emotional elements of the story that students could follow and connect with. An essential part of the process was the feedback. As the scriptwriter/director was from a nonsocial work background it was felt that the knowledge and expertise of practitioners and academics was vital when editing the scripts to ensure the language was appropriate and included the key messages. The scriptwriter/director worked with the actors in a recording studio to ensure that the sound production was of a professional quality. It was important that the characters sounded authentic, engaging, and believable. To facilitate this the scriptwriter/director worked closely with the sound technician to ensure that the background sounds, e.g. the sound of children playing, and traffic noises enriched the story telling and the actors voices were clear, captured the emotion of the script and enabled the voices of the 'service users' to be heard.

Six case studies were produced covering different issues and concerns, including, child protection, adult mental health older adults, disabilities and child abuse. Learning activities included creating mind maps, researching specific conditions, completing assessments, group discussions, critical reflections and exploring values and the professional social work roles related to each case.

Methods

The study received approval from the BAHSS Ethics Committee, University of Central Lancashire (reference number BAHSS2 01083), and was focussed around three key research questions: How do students engage with podcasts and associated activities? What aspects of the podcast engaged the students? And to what extent does the use of podcasts facilitate preparation for placements? The survey was issued to 120 1st year undergraduate and postgraduate students studying social work in the academic year 2023/24. 66 students responded, creating a response rate of 55%. A survey link was created and made accessible through the virtual learning platform module space (Blackboard). The survey was anonymous, being designed to ask questions about students' use of the podcasts and to collate information on module and programme.

Design, recruitment and analysis

We collected qualitative and quantitative data using an anonymous online survey tool. The survey was designed to ask questions about how students on professional social work programmes used the podcasts and associated learning activities in pre placement modules. The survey collated limited personal characteristics of respondents including age range, gender, and ethnicity. The survey was adjusted to accommodate the diverse learning needs of students, including being accessible to students who use screen readers, magnifier and available in audio. Students on UG/PG social work programme were able to access the podcasts to prepare for their placement whether or not they consented to participate in the study. Students all studied within one single Higher Education environment, were all in their first year of social work training and were provided with information about the study by their tutors. Students were asked to provide consent to participate in the research and advised that their participation would have no bearing on any grading of their assessment. Those who consented to participate were provided with a survey link accessed on the VLE platform for the module. The data gathered for this study was securely stored. Students participating were provided with information about the study and that the choice to participate was up to them and this would have no bearing on grading of their assessment.

Regarding analysis, Excel and the survey tool were used for basic descriptive statistical analysis of the quantitative survey data. We have sought to contextualize the broad characteristics of this group of respondents within the national UK social work student population. Qualitative data was derived from open text box responses in the survey which were analyzed thematically using the approach discussed by Braun & Clarke (2006), which involves familiarization with and coding of data before analyzing and presenting themes. Our analysis focussed mostly on semantic coding (focussing on what was said) but later sections will also draw in some more latent coding and analytical

observations—aimed at some more underpinning themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Byrne, 2022). Our reflexive approach enabled us to focus more around ‘knowing practice’ than the ‘methodolatory’ of prioritizing procedural approaches—especially when the depth of the data itself was limited (Chamberlain, 2000). We make only modest claims for this data given its limitations and the size of the sample. We acknowledge the restrictions of this survey approach and draw a distinction especially between the brief, contextualizing, quantitative strand—and the qualitative strand of responses we have analyzed and interpreted. What we are able to provide is illustrative data and comments from the respondents about their experience of learning using podcasts—in the hope that this may inform further debate and enhance aspects of social work education. All quotes provided are broadly illustrative of a commonly held viewpoint—unless otherwise stated.

Findings

We now turn to the findings from the 66 respondents. All were in the first year of their qualifying social work programme—with 75% ($n = 49$) on the undergraduate BA programme, 11% ($n = 7$) on the undergraduate Apprenticeship programme and the remaining 14% ($n = 9$) on the Masters. As expected, the group predominantly defined themselves as female (86%, $n = 56$) and 71% ($n = 46$) identified as white—with a further 15% ($n = 10$) Asian/related and 11% ($n = 7$) Black/related). This is a slightly higher proportion of white students than the national average on social work courses (66%)—but lower than the national HE average (74%) across all programmes (Skills for Care, 2023). It is interesting to note as outlined in Figure 1, especially the wide age range of these students—and relatively even balance across the 20s, 30s and 40s.

This, very broadly, reflects the typical national breakdown of age on social work courses in the UK—which are (at both UG and PG levels) a far more mature student population than the HE averages in the UK (Skills for Care, 2023).

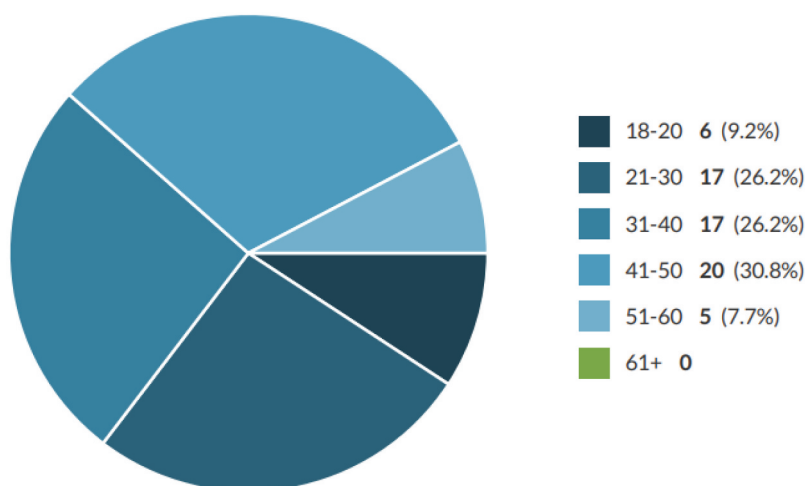


Figure 1. Age of respondents.

Moving from the demographic makeup, we can now consider the respondent views of the podcasts. Significantly, the podcasts were used, typically, on more than one occasion. Nearly 70% of the respondents listened at least twice—with just under 10% of those listening five times or more to the podcasts. This is quite a startling finding—certainly beyond our expectations—and suggests considerable merit and value in the learning material. Furthermore, the discussion elements built into the podcasts were felt by the respondents to be informative and helped to shape practice with an overwhelming majority of 96% ($n = 62$) thinking the reflective discussions at the end of the case studies informed their work.

It is informative to delve further into the text box explanations here and we identified three thematic, semantic areas as codes (*reflection, innovation and application*). The most common code ($n = 10$) was reflection—linked to how the podcast enabled deeper reflection and insight of the scenario podcast:

It was good to listen to the voice of Amelia but [what] was very informative was the effects on the family. Hearing the voices made the podcast personal and lifelike situation rather than just reading a case study.

Innovation was the second most common code identified. There were significant numbers of comments ($n = 8$) around the more pedagogical elements linked to the accessibility and portability of a podcast and an appreciation of its imaginative approach ($n = 5$)—which included other comments (5) about it simply ‘not being another lecture’ and enabling students to situate themselves more easily within the scenario:

This was a really great production/presentation that allowed me to download and listen to the material at my own leisure, time and time again, even whilst driving, just like an audio book, to familiarise myself with the salient points of the case study and to think deeper about it. The reflective discussions at the end will definitely inform the way in which I speak with and work with my service users because they help me place myself in the service.

The third key code (application) brings together an appreciation of the professional discussion element of the podcast ($n = 7$) with its ‘applied’ nature—examining different approaches to the case (6)—so, hearing professionals talk about a case also enables students to imagine themselves within the scenario:

I feel I retain so much more . . . via a podcast. Then the summary of the case study between 2 professionals challenging some of the issues was so helpful. An ideal way to learn!

The reflective discussions were articulated in a clear and concise way by the speakers. They raised several points through their analysis that I didn’t initially stop to consider. Discussing the case study back and forth in this way felt like attending a seminar and listening to others voicing out their concerns. This was a really great user’s shoes, they help me imagine the issues that the service user is experiencing from their perspective.

Given the significant use of the podcasts, it is important to consider response to a later question which asked how respondents engage with the podcasts outside of the classroom—and asked for an explanation of their response. These responses are presented by incidence. Most respondents ($n = 45$) answered and the leading response in this area ($n = 15$) was simply about listening in a home environment—clearly for most participants this was somewhere that was quiet and away from work and university distractions where they could more fully engage:

I listened to this at home and immersed myself into it

This concept of immersion felt sufficiently evident throughout the data to form a helpful theme from our three codes. Importantly though a large number ($n = 10$) also made specific reference to engaging with the podcast to support work related to the assignment:

I listened to this a few times at home firstly at the beginning of the module and then a few times around the time of completing my assignment

It was good to learn from the podcast as it did stick in my head when completing my assignment

Other comments related to engaging during car journeys ($n = 4$) but also some responses talked about how group discussions were enabled as part of the podcast ‘process’ – so that they could be ...

Shared with my colleagues

Moving forward through the learning process, we asked what respondents had learned as a result of listening to the podcast—with 41 responses, we were able to group them together to, again, identify some key codes (*realism*, *understanding*, *criticality*). The largest group of responses ($n = 21$) we themed as ‘reality’ as respondents expressed in different ways how the podcasts brought the person ‘to life’ within an ‘actual case’:

I found the podcast very informative and it was an easy listen ... With just starting our social work degree it helps to hear about ‘real life’ situations that we will come across and what sort of support we can offer the people in need

The podcasts brought to life Jack Hanson. ... I found the podcasts extremely useful to help me bring Jack’s character to life, thus learning a lot more of Jack as a person.

Another resonate theme from within the responses (noted in $n = 15$) was ‘understanding,’ as in how the students learned about the importance of working with the individual as a person, and finding out about all aspects of their life experiences to inform practice, for example:

... much greater understanding of Jack, this helped me inform my work ...

... it is important to gather a wide range of understanding to support an individual ...

Several responses ($n = 10$) were made regarding what we have coded as ‘criticality’ – as they expressed that they learned from the podcasts the importance of finding out that there were a range of perspectives about the person, and it was important to listen to the person but also to others for example:

It is important to gather a wide range of understanding to support an individual, often individuals we support do not view themselves how others view them.

[I learned that] ... there is a lot of grey area, and it can be tricky to determine what is best for Jack and the situation as there are many different variables.

Within the notion of criticality, we also noted a realization within several of the responses ($n = 11$) that the person experienced discrimination resulting in barriers to practice and the importance of emphasizing the need for practice to be underpinned by social work values:

... disability is not a crime and people need to be listened to and given equal treatment because they are humans with rights like any other person.

Furthermore, other responses expressed how they learned from the Podcasts to break the case study down and that there were different approaches and variables which meant it was difficult to determine what was best for the person ($n = 3$):

I learnt which approach to take and how to break the case down into manageable sections.

Being able to look through and be able to pick out what was wrong and how we could make it better and being able to become better future social workers.

Finally in this section, we report on the links between the podcasts, assessment, and overall learning. There were responses which advised that the Podcasts enabled them to put their other learning from their studies into practice within a 'real-life' situation which also supported them to answer the questions in their assignment ($n = 5$).

I learnt how to answer the questions within the assignment, it gave more in-depth details of Jack.

The podcast gave me an opportunity to understand the information that I have been learning in [the module code] and how this should be practised within the profession. I found this very helpful, especially the discussion from the lecturers.

So much, it's very good to be able to practice everything we've learned in a real situation.

Some respondents ($n = 15$) discussed the benefits of using Podcasts to contribute to their learning. As learners they found the Podcasts to be a different and a refreshing way of learning as they were easy to listen to:

A different way of learning. This is better than just reading a book or searching for information.

Can be difficult for some learners reading lots of information, the podcast is a refreshing way to have the information.

There were responses around how easy it was to download and listen to Podcast to support their learning ($n = 3$):

Yes, I am very happy with the quality, high production values and the way I can download and listen to these podcasts on my phone. I listen to Audio books all the time, to and from my commute to work and having a downloadable podcasts such as this makes it easier for students. I can download this on to my mobile and listen to it in the car, over and over again, until everything sinks in.

With this final comment ('sinks in') we return to our theme of immersion—and we considered latent codes that might capture the second group of codes (realism, understanding, criticality) and agreed that 'narrative' captured the cluster appropriately. Our

survey concluded by asking what topics they would most like future podcasts to cover—and a wide range of suggestions were made which included looked after children, self-neglect, grief and loss and mental capacity assessments. In addition, respondents suggested podcasts which cover social work theories and case discussions to provide learning on how problems/issues are addressed. Several respondents suggested that Podcasts would be valued to support and complement other teaching and learning strategies, and for help with assignments.

And yet, perhaps our most important finding was the sheer popularity of using podcasts in this way as it told a story from different perspectives in a compelling way which reinforced other learning activities. Overall satisfaction with the Podcasts was very high with 83% being extremely or very satisfied, and 16% being satisfied/somewhat satisfied. Any endeavor that has an ‘approval’ rating of 99% is obviously very pleasing—but also gives rise to the question—how come? The overwhelming level of satisfaction noted above acts as a springboard for our discussion of the findings.

Discussion—a deeper way of learning

Married to this repeated use of the podcasts by the respondents, we can posit the question—what is it about podcasts that appeals to social work students in this way? We noted above our modest claims for the reach of our thematic analysis—that said, we had six semantic codes, and we endeavored to delve into a more latent analysis. To do this we created latent themes of ‘immersion’ and ‘narrative’ as we sought to create deeper meaning—but through reflection observed that the thread running through the data here was the importance of storytelling in this approach (obviously an exercise in constructing immersive narratives) and specifically the ability of the podcast case studies to move away from didactic teaching into the realm of storytelling—whilst retaining learning.

Story telling in podcasts

Theoretical frameworks concerned with learning that underpin our discussion of storytelling include Piaget’s work in moving from learners receiving knowledge—to creating it, based on their own experiences (Hilgard & Bower, 1975). We further refer to Vygotsky’s work, in developing Piaget’s approach, with the notion of socio-cultural cognition, where all learning takes place in a cultural context, involving social interactions (Gonzalez DeHass & Willems, 2012). Vygotsky offers the concept of the ‘zone of proximal development’ (ZPD) suggesting that students learn best when the subject is just beyond their range of existing experiences—getting support to move from what they know—to what they can know (Hammond et al., 2001). It is into this theoretical framework we place storytelling—where the educator uses podcasts as stories to move the student into new areas of learning.

Stories are a way in which we can imagine another person’s experiences. As Delgado notes,

Stories humanize us. They emphasize our differences in ways that can ultimately bring us closer together. They allow us to see how the world looks from behind someone else’s

spectacles. They challenge us to wipe off our own lenses and ask, ‘Could I have been overlooking something all along?’ (Delgado, 1989, p. 2440)

In turn, podcasts can stimulate the listeners’ imaginations and support them to co-construct or co-create the story through their own mental pictures from the narrative. This may aid their cognition and the retention of what is heard (Fox et al., 2023). In this way, some authors argue that podcasts can act as a conceptual bridge between new and prior knowledge as a pathway to deeper thinking (Goldman, 2018). The students can then apply and extend these messages to their own experiences (Van Petegem et al., 2021). We have referenced examples of this above such as how the case study podcast helped learning, suggesting ‘lifelike’ podcasts offer new ways of thinking that enable translation into practice and facilitate more empathic ways of thinking. As one student noted, ‘they help me place myself in the service user’s shoes, they help me imagine the issues that the service user is experiencing from their perspective.’

This type of experience—based in reality but using imagined/anonymized cases—offers an opportunity to reduce some elements of risk to service user engagement—whilst also promoting aspects of a social justice approach. Storytelling from the perspectives of service users was explored by Voronka and Grant (2022) in a Canadian study. They point to the mainstreaming of service user storytelling in social work education, and the challenges of this in terms of the risks it poses to the service users in making their personal experiences public, and as a ‘ceremonial’ practice focussing on individual experiences which mask the need for political change. Whilst the service users in the study reported that their stories were a way of contributing to students learning, they did hold things back and constructed an acceptable story. Their stories were viewed as anti-discriminatory work as demystifying, as well as bringing people together. Adult education has a strong history of using storytelling as part of a repertoire of approaches to foster community links and activism. For example (Wilbur et al., 2022), used podcasting and storytelling to raise awareness of migration, drawing on narratives from people with lived experience. An emphasis on story telling from a person’s lived experience arguably challenges barriers created by traditional publishing formats within academia and, by extension, Eurocentric structures of what constitutes knowledge. Podcasts can give a platform to voices that are traditionally marginalized and challenge dominant narratives. Waldron et al. (2023) examine podcasts in broader social science areas found they offered opportunities for students to construct ‘counterstories’ that challenge dominant social narratives—including prescriptive ideas about story telling (Waldron et al., 2023). This is an exciting space, especially for pre-placement students, where the need to imagine new narratives for the people they will soon be working with is obviously important. As one student noted, ‘the reflective discussions at the end will definitely inform the way in which I speak with and work with my service users because they help me place myself in the service.’

Baelo-Allue (2019) explores the meaning of—and connection between—transhumanism and transmedia storytelling. Transmedia is simply concerned with the deployment of different forms of media to share learning amongst learners, whilst transhumanism examines the enhancement of human capacity—such as students working together to develop collective intelligence. Even though it has evolved over the past few years,

storytelling is still an isolated activity compared to the printed book. Podcasts offer an opportunity to both allow individual and group learning for such transformation—hence we see student respondents talking of how they ... ‘listened to this at home and immersed myself in to it’ – at the same time as others ‘share with colleagues’ – both in the sense of other students—and hearing the discussions between the professionals on the podcast. Finally in this section we note above how these podcasts were also used repeatedly—‘time and time again’ as one student said. The accessibility of the medium has been found to offer tangible benefits for a range of students with varying form of disability whilst the repetition also affords an opportunity for what Weiss et al. refer to as ‘mastery’ (Weiss et al., 2016).

Podcasts and adult learning

We noted above, the work of Piaget and Vygotsky in conceptualizing social cognition—and now turn to notions of adult learning and how, as educators, we need to ensure we focus on the quality of the learning experience for (adult) social work students. Weiss et al. (2016) research examined podcasts in educational settings and found that the quality of the design was a key determinant in achieving success in terms of educational outcomes—but also that those designing podcast learning tools struggled mostly with providing signals for critical content—and preparing students for their use. So, for this final section we wish to make some observations on adult learning theory and podcasts in pursuit of excellence in learning. Andragogy is concerned with how adults learning (Knowles, 1975). Merriam and Baumgartner (2020) discuss how andragogy follows several principles that should be applied and guide the development of learning activities for adults, including understanding that:

- Adults are self-directed learners.
- Adults need to apply their experiences to their learning.
- Adults are motivated within learning that can be applied to their professional role
- adult learning is more successful when it is problem-centered

The aim of following andragogic principles within the design of our Podcasts is to maximize student learning. We were attracted to using story telling podcasts from social work practice within particularly the preparation for practice modules. Podcasts complement adult learning principles as the students can be self-directed utilizing them. The podcasts may deepen the learners’ engagement with and understanding of the content compared to more ‘traditional’ styles of learning (McNamara & Drew, 2019). The learning activities linked to the podcasts are student centered and problem focused. The students can utilize and apply their experiences to the analysis of the narrative within the podcasts which tackle the issues and challenges within social work practice. The aim was to design podcasts that were highly relevant and motivating to the students as the storytelling elements of the case studies mirrored the issues and challenges within their upcoming placement and those they may encounter in their future professional role. And this is not necessarily done in isolation—students have opportunities to discuss the podcasts material—this is an important step. Wilbur et al. (2022) looked at fostering solidarity—and activism—through arts-based podcast development and ‘sheds light’

upon the less researched and emotional dimensions of education, creating ‘spaces of disruption’ through a public pedagogy.

Of course, our particular study approach presents challenging scenarios, are problem centered and—in being so constructed—potentially expose the learner to difficult (virtual) situations. This element is deliberately designed in—and was noted by one respondent, ‘the case study doesn’t demonstrate emotional impact whereas the podcast identifies emotions in more detail.’ Story telling means that the audience can connect and retain its messages more easily when it is memorable and in an accessible narrative. The messages within the narrative are amplified as the listener can hear not only the surface meanings of the words but also derive richer meanings through the convictions and emotions expressed by the speakers,

... we hear not just the words, but the emanations between the words: a chuckle, a sigh, a sob. We also absorb tone, a significant factor in how we respond uniquely to the speaker ... (Fox et al., 2023, p. 410).

Dawkins (2021), writing about his learning from delivering student-led podcast programmes, talks about emotion-focussed pedagogies and the pedagogies of discomfort. Arguing against the commodification of education leading to an avoidance of emotional content, he makes the case for embracing emotional context to enable the application of personal experience—and development, especially relevant here in the professional role. He specifically talks about how podcasts can make emotional connections between different narratives and their resonance with personal experience:

Emotion [...] flows in and around the broader terrain of their stories, and from the broader material-discursive frameworks of the students’ own lives (Dawkins, 2021, p. 1053)

In this sense stories and podcasts not only fit well with adult learning principles but offer opportunities to consider the connection between uncomfortable practice problems and personal experiences. As a student noted, ‘I think reflective discussions in all areas are extremely valuable. Obtaining others’ views can support your own growth and change alongside you offering your own views.’ As social work educators, the challenge that now remains is both to understand and deliver what works best for our students—but also to pay attention to the development of theoretical, educational frameworks that help us understand what works in these complex, emotional, cognitive areas.

Conclusion

This paper has reported on the findings of a survey conducted on a group of social work students at a university in the UK. A high-quality series of podcasts were produced, centered around a variety of case studies—involving actors portraying roles, professionals discussing the case and offering opportunities for students’ reflection. The survey examined students’ experiences of the podcasts. We found that this approach was extremely well received by the students and overwhelmingly positive and have identified codes and themes that characterize the trends of their appreciation. In attempting to trace the roots of this popularity we looked especially at the role of storytelling in learning and related adult learning notions. Making links to the medium of podcasts and students’ personal narratives, critical pedagogy, emotion, discomfort and professional development we argue that this approach ought to be

utilized more than is currently the case. Developing the pedagogy of social work education surely has an interest in approaches that enable practitioners to hear ‘not just the words’ as we learn how better to respond to the needs of those with whom we work.

Limitations and further research

The modest sample size analyzed in this paper is acknowledged and further research could usefully extend the application of this approach to a broader audience across different institutions. Similarly, the depth of the data obtained and presented here could usefully be developed by more in-depth qualitative approaches such as focus groups and one-to-one interviewing. Finally, a more longitudinal approach could look at longer term benefits of the approach.

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