

PODCAST EPISODES AS INCLUSIVE ASSESSMENT

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Podcast episodes were introduced as a form of inclusive assessment in a final year undergraduate Geography module, GG3010 (Global urbanism: sustainable cities and communities), at University College Cork (UCC) in 2020/21. In GG3010, students produce an informed podcast episode based on independent research into themes from the module. This is an active learning method, where the students learn by doing and actively create knowledge. Students have a high degree of choice in the assessment and can work individually or collaboratively with peers. The podcast episodes range from 10-25 minutes duration depending on whether they work individually or collaboratively. Students communicate their findings in a conversational style to a diverse audience, building skills in accessible communication of geographic knowledge. The assessment was designed following principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), especially multiple modes of representation. Within higher education there remains a disproportionate focus on written forms of assessment, especially written examinations, and written essays or reports (National Forum, 2017). While these traditional forms of assessment hold many strengths and benefits, alternative assessments, such as research-based podcast episodes present many opportunities for enhancing student learning experiences and inclusivity in learning and assessment, allowing **all students** to be active and engaged learners.

In the introductory lecture for the module, students are introduced to UDL and inclusive learning to promote their engagement. I explain current directions in higher education (e.g. drives for inclusion, UDL, shifts to learning-centred approaches), how and why I integrate these approaches into my own practices and what I perceive to be the benefits to them as learners. For GG3010, I devise detailed assessment information sheets for the students, which are provided in the first class. I provide details on the rationale for the assessment, content, requirements, options, etc. I also provide a detailed assessment rubric, so students have information about the criteria used for assessment of their work. The rubric is embedded into Canvas – our virtual learning environment – and completed as part of the feedback process. Ensuring common criterion are used in the assessment of student work assists in **reducing the impact of bias on learners**. In addition to detailed information sheets, I also hold a podcast workshop. This is a scaffolding exercise, where we discuss the nature of verbal conversations (e.g. that they are not word-perfect – there are pauses, we might mispronounce something), which helps ensure inclusion of diversity. Students are also introduced to different ways of recording their podcast (e.g. software, smartphone, etc.) and there is no expectation that podcast are to be professionally produced, as the focus is on enhancing accessible communication – a core skill for life. Detailed information and clear communication on the assessment is critical for this module due to the large class size, which helps reduce administration loads of alternative assessments. The class size for GG3010 consistently sits at approximately 120 students. To **overcome some of the challenges of designing alternative assessment for large classes**, careful and thoughtful design were crucial. The focus on independent learning enabled students to

take responsibility for their learning and work independently. Offering peer learning options also reduces the assessment load, as there were fewer overall podcast episodes to grade. The nature of podcast episodes means that **challenges to academic integrity** from AI and other sources, can be thoughtfully overcome. The assessment requires students to develop their own understanding of the academic literature and their research data so they can communicate this to a diverse audience.

Year-on-year, students inform the development and evolution of the assessment. This has helped shape the assessment and its inclusivity. This primarily occurs in the reflective learning statement. Students complete a reflective learning statement that they submit together with their podcast episode. Students are asked to reflect on what they have learnt, together with how they have learnt, as a means of developing expert learners – a central tenant of UDL – whereby students consider not just the content or topics they developed new knowledge on, but **how** they learnt and retained knowledge. Often, it is choice, independent research and the aural/oral mode of delivery of knowledge that offer the deepest learning (Kenna, 2023). Each year students remark on the benefits of an oral/aural assessment, whereby the active listening to what is being said, together with speaking their ideas and knowledge out loud, results in a deeper learning and greater retention of knowledge (see Kenna, 2023 for further discussion of impacts). They also reflect on the benefits of the podcast for building skills in oral presentations, and of asynchronous delivery where they can focus on developing their communication skills in a less pressurised format than face-to-face. The knowledge they generate about themselves as learners, can be transferred to other contexts, like workplaces. Reflections on challenges are also offered and through these reflections changes have been made to improve inclusion, engagement and enhance learning experiences overall. One example is requests to work with others on the assessment. This enables **leaners to actively inform the design and implementation of inclusive approaches to assessment**, the benefits of which are detailed below.

Choice is integral to the design and success of this inclusive assessment. Students choose their topics, themes and case studies for the research and they are encouraged to do research on topics that are of interest to them, making the research and assessment more meaningful. Students are also provided with choice in how they work – they are given the option to collaborate with other students or work independently. In 2023/24, half chose to work individually, and half chose to work with others. To help students make an informed decision about which style of assessment to engage with (i.e. group or individual), the students are presented with two sets of assessment criteria, which outlines the different requirements for groups or individuals in terms of content, themes, time limits, etc. I also articulate the potential benefits of individual and peer learning. This allows students to make an informed choice and **ensures equity and validity of assessment when offering choice** (following O’Neill, 2011). The collaborative peer learning that some students opt for, allows for inclusion of diverse learning approaches.

This module and the assessment form part of the innovative and transformative [id+ Project at UCC](#), which offers inclusive learning opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities. This initiative is part of UCC’s **broader response to, and engagement with, EDI at the institutional level**. GG3010 is one co-learning module offered to students in the Certificate in Social Citizenship. Through this module, students with intellectual disabilities work collaboratively with other students on course work and

assessment. Because UDL has been part of my practice for many years, the students with intellectual disabilities engage with the module and the assessment just like all the other students. I have not had to create a separate assessment; the students work in a group with others and all the students collaborate in co-learning activities. This avoids the provision of separate or segregated learning and assessment, by **designing assessments for all students from the outset**.

The impacts of inclusivity in learning and assessment are highly valued, as one student reflected: *“I am really thankful for the inclusive aspect of this course. I have never experienced anything like it at my home university. I have found that my teachers were for the most part receptive to my needs as a student with a learning disability, but I have never experienced a class where the overall structure was meant for all learning styles. Because of this, the class was far less daunting and easier to become invested/interested in because I knew all varieties of people had a place in it.”* (Student reflection, 2023/24). A combination of factors makes this assessment meaningful for all students: a structured assessment task with clear and detailed guidelines; use of oral/aural methods; independent research and new knowledge construction; high degree of choice and creativity (encouraging intrinsic motivation), including options for peer collaborations; and development of new skills, especially diverse communication of knowledge. The podcast assessment is inclusive of diverse learners and enhances learning experiences for all. Having made sustained investments in inclusive assessment, students are performing in ways that brings out their best. Year-on-year there has been a notable improvement in student performance. The podcast episodes offer an effective way of seeing what students have learnt and how their learning comes to life in different ways. There has also been a notable decrease in individual accommodations.

References

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