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Can podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback promote self-efficacy among undergraduate nursing students?

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Abstract

Background Improving assessment guidance and feedback for students has become an international priority within higher education. Podcasts have been proposed as a tool for enhancing teaching, learning and assessment. However, a stronger theory-based rationale for using podcasts, particularly as a means of facilitating assessment guidance and feedback, is required.

Objective To explore students' experiences of using podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback.

To consider how these podcasts shaped beliefs about their ability to successfully engage with, and act on, assessment guidance and feedback.

Design Exploratory qualitative study.

Setting Higher education institution in North-East Scotland.

Participants Eighteen third year undergraduate nursing students who had utilized podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback within their current programme of study.

Methods Participants took part in one of four focus groups, conducted between July-September 2013. Purposive sampling was utilised to recruit participants of different ages, gender, levels of self-assessed information technology skills and levels of academic achievement. Data analysis was guided by the framework approach.

Findings Thematic analysis highlighted similarities and differences in terms of students' experiences of using podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback. Further analysis revealed that Self-Efficacy Theory provided deeper theoretical insights into how the content, structure and delivery of podcasts can be shaped to promote more successful engagement with assessment guidance and feedback from students. The structured, logical approach of assessment guidance podcasts appeared to strengthen self-efficacy by providing readily accessible support and by helping students convert intentions into action. Students with high self-efficacy in relation to tasks associated with assessment were more likely to engage with feedback, whereas those with low self-efficacy tended to overlook opportunities to access feedback due to feelings of helplessness and futility.

Conclusions Adopting well-structured podcasts as an educational tool, based around the four major sources of information (performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physiological and emotional states), has potential to

promote self-efficacy for individuals, as well as groups of students, in terms of assessment guidance and feedback.

Keywords

Podcasts, Self-efficacy theory, Assessment, Feedback, Undergraduates, Focus groups, Qualitative research

Highlights

Self-efficacy theory illuminated students' use of guidance and feedback podcasts

Accessing guidance podcasts, when and wherever, increases students' satisfaction

Well-structured podcasts strengthen self-efficacy by making assessments more do-able

Students with high self-efficacy more readily engage with podcasted feedback

Students with low self-efficacy overlook opportunities to access podcasted feedback

INTRODUCTION

In the United Kingdom, a national survey of final-year students' experiences of higher education (National Student Survey (NSS)) has consistently exposed that, across a range of teaching and learning indicators, student dissatisfaction is greatest in relation to assessment practices (Buckley 2012). Consequently, improving assessment guidance and feedback within higher education institutions (HEIs) has become a national priority (Nicol 2011). Specifically, students note their dissatisfaction in relation to quality, timeliness and level of detail of feedback (Buckley 2012; Lunt and Curran 2010). The NSS recommend that strategies to address ongoing student dissatisfaction with assessment practices are informed by students' evaluations of what helps them engage with, and act on, feedback (Buckley 2012). For example, evidence suggests that students like verbal feedback to clarify what is required and how this can best be achieved in terms of converting feedback into action (Hounsell 2007; Weaver 2006). More recently, dialogue between students and lecturers has been identified as paramount to ensuring students actually engage with feedback (Blair and McGinty 2013). With this in mind, traditional approaches to assessment guidance and feedback, such as merely providing students with written feedback or examination grades, are

arguably no longer appropriate; HEIs need to explore how best to supplement this type of feedback.

BACKGROUND

Use of digital technologies within HEIs has extended greatly over the past two decades, however, it cannot assume that all students are ready to embrace these technologies as a means of improving teaching, learning and assessment. Just because students use technologies in one context – perhaps for entertainment or to locate information - does not mean they want to, or are equipped to, use technologies for learning (Merhi 2015; Parkes et al. 2015). Kendal et al. (2015) caution that reducing face-to-face contact can be disconcerting for students and may undermine engagement with teaching and learning. A number of authors advocate for a complementary approach whereby technologies are used alongside face-to-face teaching, rather than as a replacement (Merhi 2015; Parkes et al. 2015; McKinney and Page 2009). Furthermore, there is ongoing debate about the most effective balance of online to face-to-face activities and, indeed, whether increased student satisfaction is sufficient for new methods to be regarded as intrinsically worthwhile (Merhi 2015; Vogt et al. 2010).

Podcasts within HEIs

Since 2005, the use of podcasts to enable students to listen or view learning materials has become increasingly prevalent in HEIs (Ritchie 2015). Campbell (2005 p34) refers to a podcast as ‘a portmanteau word combining iPod and broadcasting’. From a strategic viewpoint, podcasts have in the past been put forward as an educational tool that provides effective experiential learning whilst responding to the needs of a generation of ‘digital natives’; with the inherent notion that ‘digital immigrants’ may find podcasts less satisfactory (Ferris 2012; Margaryan et al. 2011; Bennett et al. 2008). More recently, this divide between digital natives’ and digital immigrants’ use of technologies (such as podcasts) has been challenged; evidence suggests caution in making assumptions about how different generations utilise technologies for learning (Lai and Hong 2015; Thompson 2013).

One of the most striking features of podcasts is the flexibility with which they can be used across different environments (via computer speakers, car stereo or headphones) (Burke and Cody 2014). This ease of access and unlimited opportunity to revisit

podcasted materials allows students to tailor educational activities to their personal requirements (Ritchie 2015; Lunt and Curran 2010). Campbell (2005 p44) also observed that podcasts have potential to engage students in active learning because ‘the human voice retains its inspiration’ in much the same way as an absorbing lecture. However, challenges exist in relation to the additional time required to engage with podcasts, lack of ‘fit’ with some students’ preferred learning styles and concerns over ‘added-value’ (Jalali et al. 2011; Schlairet, 2010). In addition, although generally positive about podcasts, students are reported to prefer a blended approach with regular face-to-face contacts with lecturers (McKinney and Page 2009).

Despite debate around the benefits and challenges of the podcast as an effective educational tool, an emerging literature suggests that the informed use of podcasts is valued by students, particularly those with high self-efficacy (Burke and Cody, 2014; Kazlauskas and Robinson, 2012). The main focus of this literature is, however, on the use of podcasts to replace or augment traditional lectures. There is a more limited evidence base around use of podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback.

Podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback within our institution

In 2012, at an HEI in North-East Scotland, podcasts were introduced to help undergraduate nursing students engage with, and understand, assessment guidance and feedback in relation to a scenario-based summative examination. An example scenario was provided as a formative exercise along with a podcast about how to tackle the examination questions. Following the examination, students were given access to another podcast which provided generic feedback, as model answers, for the examination questions. Students received their individual grades for the examination in the usual way; that is, their grade was emailed to them individually.

As a next step, the same cohort of students were provided with podcasts related to a summative essay submission. First, in line with Biggs and Tang’s (2011 p64) assertion that, ‘Arguably the most powerful enhancement to learning is feedback during learning’, a series of four short assessment guidance podcasts were made available at the time that students were researching and writing a summative essay. Dialogue between students and lecturers about the podcast was encouraged via an online

discussion board and lecture-based ‘question-and-answer’ session. Two weeks following submission, a podcast giving generic feedback was made available online. Students received individualised written feedback, as is usual practice, about six weeks after submission.

This exploratory pilot work highlighted the need to increase understanding in relation to how podcasts were utilised by students, when, and why; and to gain further insights into perceived barriers and challenges to using podcasts.

Self-Efficacy Theory

According to Bandura’s Self-Efficacy Theory (1997), an individual’s self-efficacy plays a major role in how situations are perceived and how individuals respond in different situations. Self-efficacy may be defined as ‘belief in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations’ (Bandura 1997 p2). Thus, self-efficacy determines whether behaviour change will be initiated, how much effort will be expended, and how long it will be sustained in the face of barriers and challenges. It follows that those with high self-efficacy are more likely to engage in a task or behaviour, whereas those with low self-efficacy will shy away from tasks or behaviours due to feelings of helplessness and futility.

Self-Efficacy Theory is a key part of social cognitive theory which holds that individuals’ behaviours, environment and cognitive factors are highly inter-dependent. Bandura (1977) suggested that individuals typically make self-efficacy judgements based on four major sources of information: performance accomplishments (self-reflection on previous success and failures); vicarious experience (watching or listening to others perform tasks or behaviours successfully); social persuasion (receiving encouragement that helps them believe they can succeed); and physiological and emotional states (how they feel, physically and mentally, about a specific task). In addition, unlike self-confidence and self-esteem which have a largely stable influence on individuals’ behaviour, self-efficacy is a more temporary, easy to influence characteristic which is very much related to specific tasks or situations (Ritchie 2015).

As a result of extensive conceptual and empirical work, Self-Efficacy Theory is well recognised as a means of understanding and influencing students’ behaviour in

educational contexts (Ritchie 2015). That is, self-efficacy may predict students' readiness to engage with assessment guidance; as a mediator, self-efficacy may influence how students deal with feedback; and finally, self-efficacy may moderate whether students' intentions in relation to feedback are translated and fed forward into future assessments (Schwarzer 2008). However, to our knowledge, Self-Efficacy Theory has not been considered as a means of understanding students' experiences of podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback.

The aim of this study was to explore the potential of podcasts, for assessment guidance and feedback, to promote students' self-efficacy in relation to assessments; the objectives were two-fold:

1. To explore students' experiences of using podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback
2. To consider how these podcasts shaped beliefs about their ability to successfully engage with, and act on, assessment guidance and feedback.

METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

A qualitative study, involving four focus groups, with third-year undergraduate nursing students was undertaken at a HEI in North East Scotland. The inductive nature of a qualitative approach allowed us to attend to the *'idiosyncratic as well as the pervasive'* in terms of participants' understandings, opinions and beliefs (Kitzinger, 1994); generating in-depth insights into students' perspectives would have proved impossible using a quantitative approach. In line with a broadly social constructionist approach, we anticipated that participants' narrations would be influenced by 'here-and-now' interactions of the study setting but also by individuals' information technology (IT) skills, and past experiences of assessment (Barbour, 2014). The University Research Ethics Committee granted ethical approval (Study ID: UREC 12124). Fieldwork was carried out between July - September 2013.

Following an introductory lecture, potential participants received an invitation and participant information letter via the university email system. By emphasising that their decision to take part or not in the study would not affect their studies in any way, we aimed to ensure that students did not feel coerced to participate. Students who were

interested in participating were invited to contact either of the researchers to discuss the study further.

Purposive sampling was used to promote diversity within the sample; including, students who varied in age and gender, had different self-assessed IT skills, and different levels of academic achievement. This was facilitated by maintaining a sampling grid. In this way, we were aware of the participants' characteristics within the groups we had recruited; this information was used when updating the population about how recruitment was progressing. To be included, participants had to be currently matriculated students and have had the opportunity to access podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback in relation to both summative assessments (as described above). Some participants agreed to participate but could not attend any of the focus groups; none were excluded to ensure diversity.

At the start of every focus group, before written consent was obtained, information related to the voluntary nature of participation and plans to audio-record focus group interactions were reiterated by the researchers. Students who agreed to take part were also reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any point without explanation or negative consequence. Ground rules around disclosures, respect for privacy and assurances of anonymity were also discussed.

Data generation

Each participant took part in one focus group, held in mutually-convenient, familiar university premises. These focus groups were co-facilitated by LM and MC, module leaders for the second-year modules that introduced the podcasts. Focus groups were conducted during the students' third-year of study – that is, at a time when neither of the researchers were currently teaching the students.

Focus groups were utilised because of their potential to give unique insights into how participants react to others' views, and how participants present and support their own perspectives (Barbour 2014). A topic guide was used to encourage discussions about topics which aligned with the objectives of the study whilst also giving enough flexibility for participants to raise points that were of importance to them. The focus groups began with open questions that allowed participants to select where to start and

ended with the participants reflecting on how their views about podcasting had changed and what advice they would offer about using podcasts in the future. The focus groups lasted on average 64 minutes (range 54 – 85 minutes).

Data analysis

A systematic, rigorous approach to analysis was adopted, guided by the Framework Approach (Ritchie and Lewis 2003). The emergent themes were interrogated using the theoretical framework put forward by Self-Efficacy Theory. The rigour of analysis was strengthened by anticipating analysis in the study design, in terms of ensuring sample diversity and use of a topic guide that allowed for exploration of emergent themes during data generation. Qualitative researchers accept that it is impossible to be totally objective and are mindful of their potential influence on data generation and theory from data. From a social constructionist stance, rather than problematizing their subjectivity, qualitative researchers view it as an opportunity to engage with participants in ways that will uncover multiple realities (Sandelowski 2002).

All focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed in full. Pseudonyms were utilised for all participants. The software package N-Vivo was utilised to facilitate coding of transcripts, sorting and collating of data, and data retrieval. LM undertook initial coding of transcripts; LM and MC reviewed the coding frame and developed the analysis. Within this study, assurances about ‘trustworthiness’ and ‘authenticity’ of the findings were proffered by the researchers adopting a reflexive approach throughout the research process (Guba and Lincoln 1994).

FINDINGS

Eighteen third-year adult nursing students took part in the study; all were Caucasian and 16 were female (see Table 1). These participants, individually and collectively, recounted their experiences and understandings of accessing and using podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback. Two students had already completed other degrees, and a further two had previously undertaken ‘access to nursing’ courses; these students made a valued contribution to diversity within the sample.

The thematic analysis highlighted similarities and differences in terms of participants’ experiences of using podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback. A critical

question for this paper was whether Self-Efficacy Theory provided a deeper theoretical insight to these findings. Accordingly, the findings are presented in themes that align with Bandura's four major sources of information (see Table 2):

Performance accomplishments

Although all of the participants did eventually access the assessment guidance podcasts, those who had struggled to understand written guidance in the past reported feeling initially reticent about accessing the podcasts. Participants often spontaneously drew comparisons between written guidance they had received for other assessments and the guidance provided by combining written guidance with podcasts:

***Denise** I think when you're reading it, because you're not hearing somebody saying it, it's quite hard to understand. You'll maybe reading it a few times and think, 'Is that what they mean?' Whereas if somebody is actually speaking to you over a podcast, I think you understand it better (FG3, aged 20, 'okay' IT skills).*

Participants who engaged fully with the serial podcasts for the essay maintained that the structured, logical approach of the guidance podcasts made it seem more 'do-able':

***Ruth** I felt confident with the work I'd done after listening to the podcast. I felt like, I listened to it, I did what it said, and I produced something worthwhile, whereas at other times I'm, 'Oh, I don't know if I've done it right' (FG2, aged 20, 'okay' IT skills).*

Similarly, several participants noted that the guidance podcast made the summative examination more predictable, enabling them to work through the questions effectively and confidently:

***Ellie** When I went into the exam, I knew the type of things that I wanted to put down and I wasn't going off on a whole waffle about something else and, even though I was running out of time, I could jot stuff down because I knew from the podcast that these specific things were needed (FG2, aged 23, 'poor' IT skills).*

Participants consistently commented on the added-value of being able to listen to the podcasts as often, and in whatever context, they wished; a few explained that these opportunities for repetition had made a significant difference to their performance:

***Sandy** I sat, had my headphones in, listening to the podcast like in taxis, or just sat and listened to it on my phone, over and over again. And, like, I'm terrible at exams... my mind goes blank. First year exam I failed, second year with the podcast I passed it and third year exam I failed. So that one with the podcast, that one I passed. I think that says a lot (FG2, aged 25, 'poor' IT skills).*

Whilst the guidance podcasts were valued participants with a broad range of characteristics, including those with limited IT skills, the feedback podcasts generated more debate. Many participants described negative experiences of written feedback (typically related to quality or brevity) and this seemed to contribute to some participants' constructions of feedback as an inconsistent, futile business; around half of them struggled to see how feedback podcasts might improve their performances:

***Nina** It shouldn't be 'airy fairy' feedback. Things like, 'You need to apply more synthesis'. I don't know what that means! (Aged 25, 'good' IT skills).*

***Shirley** And the guidance for the feedback from one essay doesn't actually help you with another one that much because the assessments are quite different (Aged 49, 'okay' IT skills).*

***Jess** I think, generally, if you have passed you're quite chuffed, you know what I mean? You're just, 'Passed it! Great. Next?' (FG1, aged 30, 'good' IT skills).*

An alternative view was, however, introduced by other participants; in all cases, these participants appeared more confident about taking an active role in seeking academic support and expressed a strong desire to improve their academic performance. This more positive view of podcasted feedback seemed to relate to being able to see the opportunities for utilising feedback to inform future assessments:

***Stephanie** I want to see if I've written the right thing...*

***Shelley** It's beneficial if you fail! (Aged 42, 'okay' IT skills, previous 'access to nursing').*

***Stephanie** ... and if you want to improve the way you write an essay or whatever (FG4, aged 26, 'good' IT skills, previous degree).*

Vicarious experience

Participants consistently highlighted the benefits of having someone they knew narrate the podcasts; having that stability seemed to generate confidence and trust that the guidance offered was appropriate. Additionally, participants appreciated being able to exert some control over the situation:

Hilary *The difference for me was that, when it was a podcast, I must have stopped you a billion times to write notes in between. I couldn't have done that with you sitting in front of me, like, I can't pause you if you know what I mean! (Aged 24, 'good' IT skills).*

Ellie *It would be like Linda... Linda?*

Sandy *Then everyone doing it at different times! (Aged 25, 'poor' IT skills).*

Ellie *It would be continual! (FG2, aged 23, 'poor' IT skills).*

A few participants had their own ideas about how podcasts could be utilised to provide further opportunities for improving assessment performance. For example, in terms of overcoming the potentially detrimental impact of students asking each other what to do rather than seeking clarification from the module team:

Ellie *'Frequently asked questions' you could do it in a podcast and we could work away with that because there are things we all ask each other, you know, 'What does that mean? I don't know!' Everyone's kind of back and forth (FG2, aged 23, 'poor' IT skills).*

Several participants explained how they had successfully utilised the podcasts as a focus for shared learning, gaining support and direction from working with their peers, during their examination preparations:

Sandy *When I was studying for the exam, I wrote it out (podcast)... word-for-word (Aged 25, 'poor' IT skills).*

Jess *So did we but for the essay. We emailed them to our study group and then we discussed them (FG2, aged 30, 'good' IT skills).*

In relation to feedback, many participants were unconvinced of the benefits of listening to a lecturer articulate what they should ideally have included in their submissions. A few participants, like Harriet, share a different view:

Lucy *I think as long as people pass it, they're just not interested anymore, even if they get like a D or something like that, I mean... (Aged 25, 'good' IT skills).*

Harriet *Actually, I'd want to know why I'd only got 40%, what have I not done right (FG3, aged 30, 'very good' IT skills, previous degree).*

For these participants, generic feedback offered insights into how their performances compared to others as well as opportunities to self-evaluate; for one participant, it provided reassurance that they were not necessarily less able than their peers:

Ellie 'When you get the general one [feedback podcast] you are like, 'Oh that's okay, other people have done that too' (FG2, aged 23, 'poor' IT skills).

Social persuasion

For a number of participants, the value of guidance podcasts hinged on the content being non-patronizing. Some participants reckoned that this was more achievable if they knew the person that was delivering the podcast. One participant suggested that the manner in which the podcast was delivered was also important:

Melissa You can't just have someone just sitting talking... someone with a nice voice has to do it... that kind of makes it or breaks it! They definitely have to have a voice that you can listen to (FG3, aged 27, 'poor' IT skills, previous 'access to nursing').

Other participants asserted that podcasts should not replace opportunities for face-to-face sessions about assessment or emailing queries to the module leader. Some participants particularly liked when the narrator took a directive approach:

Stephanie Having the podcast, well, it was set in stone... this is a good plan... go this way (FG4, aged 26, 'good' IT skills, previous degree).

For feedback, podcasts had to be couched in terms which helped students take on board positive aspects of their feedback:

Ruth It's not kinder [participant's emphasis] when they say it, but if you read it it's like, 'You failed at this, you were crap at this... this was absolutely awful'. Whereas if they'd said, 'Oh you did really well on this but you just need to do a little bit more and that will make it better'. So tone of voice can be a big help.

Sandy It cushions the blow a little bit (Aged 25, 'poor' IT skills).

Ruth A more conversational approach is better (Aged 20, 'okay' IT skills).

Gail It's less harsh, isn't it? (Aged 28, 'good' IT skills).

Ellie I would agree with you. It has to be done in the right way (FG2, aged 23, 'poor' IT skills).

Participants appeared particularly sensitive to perceived inconsistencies and lack of clarity in feedback; they wanted to be told what they had done well and to be given clear instructions about how to 'correct' their work. To that end, a number of participants maintained that individual podcasted feedback was a better option.

Physiological and emotional states

Participants in all of the focus groups described how using podcasts had impacted on the way they felt, physically and mentally, about preparation for, and performance in, assessments. Having it acknowledged in the podcast that it was normal to feel stressed around the time of the exam, sometimes inspired confidence:

Rebecca *Yes... it made me realise, yes, actually I can do this! (FG1, aged 21, 'good' IT skills).*

Bolstered by engaging in the chunks of activity suggested in the podcasts, participants felt more self-assured because they understood what was expected of them. Two participants, both very motivated students, emphasised the benefits of podcasts as a means of them feeling more in control:

Stephanie *I think it's just because you could do it in your own time, and like when you were ready to sit down and do your essay, you could then listen to it once you were ready to start and it was fresh in your head (Aged 26, 'good' IT skills, previous degree).*

Shelley *Because as a module goes on, you know, there's more and more stuff and you forget things so with this it's all there... it helps you put it all together. I actually kept them on my phone and listened to them (FG4, aged 42, 'okay' IT skills, previous 'access to nursing').*

In light of the perceived benefits of the guidance podcasts as a means of reducing stress and enhancing performance, participants were keen to hear whether podcasts would be available in the future:

Jess *I found the resit for a recent exam easier because I met with the marker and she explained what they wanted in the exam. But if that had been a podcast prior to the exam that might have prevented a resit and [participant's emphasis] my stress levels going through the roof! (FG1, aged 30, 'good' IT skills).*

After considerable debate, general agreement emerged that podcast feedback could be of benefit to those who had failed an assessment, however, most participants were emphatic that they did not, and would not, listen to feedback straight after submission:

Shirley *I wouldn't have gone and listened to it straight after the exam. I listened to it when I passed the exam but, if I'd listened to it straight after, that would have worried me because it sounded slightly different to what I had written. (Aged 49, 'okay' IT skills).*

Linda *Did anybody listen to it straight after the exam?*

Nina No, not immediately after (Aged 25, 'good' IT skills).

Rebecca I thought why anybody... if I'd listened to it, I would have worried (Aged 21, 'good' IT skills).

Jess Panicked! (Aged 30, 'good' IT skills).

Scott It would have panicked you, yeah (FG1, aged 24, 'good' IT skills).

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that Self-Efficacy Theory provides a useful framework for understanding, from students' perspectives, the benefits and challenges of utilising podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback. Podcasts appear to have the potential to promote self-efficacy because of their potential to make assessments seem more 'do-able', with students reporting greater clarity about what was expected of them and increased confidence about having requisite knowledge and skills. There was some suggestion that students with high self-efficacy were more likely to spontaneously engage with the podcasts that were made available to them. In contrast, students with low self-efficacy appeared less likely to engage with the podcasts and were, at least initially more likely to problematize the use of podcasts, linking it to underlying concerns about lack of transparency around assessment processes. Whilst, podcasts may not suit all students, it is noted that podcast utilization was not as polarized as podcasts being well received by 'digital natives' and rejected by 'digital immigrants' (Prensky 2001). This aligns with recent assertions that patterns of technology use is more complex than the previously thought - for example, the needs of the programme, familiarity, cost, immediacy, gender and subject-specialism may be more influential in determining technology use for learning than generation (Lai and Hong 2015; Metallo and Agrifoglio; 2015; Selwyn 2008).

In addition, our findings offer theoretical insights to into how the four major sources of Self-Efficacy Theory - performance accomplishments; physiological and affective responses; vicarious experience; and social persuasion - can be utilized to shape the content, structure and delivery of podcasts and, in doing so, promote more positive outcomes for students in relation to assessment guidance and feedback. For example, 'chunking' assessment guidance into manageable pieces of work strengthened students' self-efficacy by helping them convert intentions into actions and fostered belief that they were personally capable of successfully completing the assessment (performance

accomplishments). Additionally, using podcasts to increase awareness that they shared many of same stressors as other students - fatigue, frustration and uncertainty - enabled students to deal with stressors more effectively and, for some, prompted action in terms of seeking additional support (physiological and affective responses).

Our findings also identify areas for further exploration. For example, podcasts may be structured in a way that encourages students to come together as a group to work on short term activities and foster self-efficacy through use of social interaction. That is, helping to create learning environments in which students share their experiences, build knowledge and skills, and develop collective beliefs about their capacity to complete assessments successfully (vicarious experience). Since dialogic approaches to feedback are now widely accepted as a productive way forward, it seems sensible to explore how this can best be achieved with podcasts (social persuasion) (Race 2015). Whilst participants within this study suggested that individual podcasted feedback may be a more useful option, the work, time and cost of presenting feedback in this way should not be underestimated.

Although previous studies have tended to focus on the value of improving feedback, our findings highlighted that students are equally open, if not more so, to the use of podcasts for assessment guidance. To capitalize on opportunities to ‘feed-in to feed-forward’, it seems prudent to introduce podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback from the start of a programme, in a way that is blended with other approaches to teaching and learning (Blair and McGinty 2013; Lunt and Curran 2010). In addition, as described elsewhere, ‘deep learners’ are effective in selecting appropriate information to enable their learning and feed-forward cycle but ‘surface learners’ tend to seek ‘mechanical fixes’ (Race 2015 p44). With podcasts there is potential to remediate this ‘technification’ and promote deeper learning by introducing ‘thinking dispositions’ - that is, podcasts can be structured in ways that encourage students to stop and reflect on, ‘What more do I need to know?’ (Orsmond and Merry 2011).

In order to address dissatisfaction and encourage students to more fully engage with assessment guidance and feedback, in the United Kingdom, the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (2009) suggests that students need to be empowered to monitor, manage and evaluate their own performances. Although uptake of assessment

guidance and feedback requires input from students, the onus to take a proactive approach and to show commitment to address ongoing dissatisfaction falls heavily on lecturers. To achieve this, we need to look at the approaches we are using and, by relating theory to practice, explore how and why they work. If lecturers have no agreed basis for developing and evaluating the use of podcasts, then it will remain difficult to evidence the ‘added-value’ of podcasts as an educational tool.

A number of study limitations may have had an impact on our findings. There is potential for bias when undertaking research with a group of students with whom the researchers have an ongoing staff-student relationship. However, within this study, neither of the researchers were directly involved in teaching the participants; thus reducing the potential impact of the researchers’ roles on students’ decisions to take part, or not, in the study, and on the data that was subsequently generated within the focus groups. At times, the way in which participants presented themselves was relational and contradictory rather than autonomous and rational. However, in line with a ‘broadly social constructionist approach’, the contextually bound nature of these accounts is not problematic (Barbour 2014); instead, it is illustrative of the difficulties that students face when trying to make sense of their experiences of assessment guidance and feedback. Although this study was carried out with one cohort of adult undergraduate nursing students, irrespective of differences in age, gender and self-assessed IT skills, participants shared similar experiences and understandings of what impacted on their performances. This is significant given that our study was undertaken at a time of change within HEIs, characterised by a shift towards being more inclusive in terms of taking student experience and satisfaction into account. Nevertheless, in order to explore transferability of our findings to other contexts, nationally and internationally, further research in this area with larger student populations is recommended. Future research could also examine the views and experiences of lecturers which were absent from our study.

CONCLUSION

We propose that adopting podcasts as a means of engaging students in assessment guidance and feedback, in line with the sources of information laid out by Self-Efficacy Theory, has the potential to promote self-efficacy for individuals as well as groups of students. It is not about sacrificing traditional approaches; it is about using technologies

in a way that ‘fits’ with underpinning pedagogies and student preference. In doing so, podcasts may contribute to creating enriched educational environments, in which students more readily strive for greater academic achievement and appreciate the need for feedback to feed-forward. Podcasts may not appeal to all our students but having the option to access well-structured podcasts, when and wherever suits them, may also increase satisfaction with assessment processes.

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Table 1: Participants' characteristics

| Focus group | Participant number | Participant | Gender | Age | Self-assessed IT skills | PC used for exam | PC used for essay |
|--------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|---------------|------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1 | 1 | Lesley | F | 43 | Okay | Y | Y |
| | 2 | Rebecca | F | 21 | Good | Y | Y |
| | 3 | Scott | M | 24 | Good | Y | Y |
| | 4 | Nina | F | 25 | Good | Y | Y |
| | 5 | Shirley | F | 49 | Okay | Y | Y |
| | 6 | Jess | F | 30 | Good | Y | Y |
| 2 | 7 | Ruth | F | 20 | Okay | Y | Y |
| | 8 | Gail | F | 28 | Good | N | Y |
| | 9 | Ellie | F | 23 | Poor | Y | N |
| | 10 | Sandy | M | 25 | Poor | Y | Y |
| | 11 | Hilary | F | 24 | Good | Y | Y |
| 3 | 12 | Denise | F | 20 | Okay | Y | Y |
| | 13 | Lucy | F | 25 | Good | N | Y |
| | 14 | Hayley | F | 30 | Very good | Y | Y |
| | 15 | Kim | F | 32 | Very good | Y | N |
| | 16 | Lindsay | F | 27 | Poor | Y | N |
| 4 | 17 | Shelley | F | 42 | Okay | Y | Y |
| | 18 | Stephanie | F | 26 | Good | Y | Y |

| Table 2: Summary of thematic analysis | | | | |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| Themes/ Sources of information (Bandura, 1997) | Performance accomplishments | Vicarious experience | Social persuasion | Physiological and emotional states |
| Description | <i>Self-reflection on previous success and failures</i> | <i>Watching or listening to others perform tasks or behaviours successfully</i> | <i>Receiving encouragement that helps them believe they can succeed</i> | <i>How they feel, physically and mentally, about a specific task</i> |
| Students' experiences of using podcasts for assessment guidance and feedback | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured, logical approach • Flexible educational tool | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Valued opportunities for repetition • Engenders trust when narrator is known • Tool for shared learning | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-patronising • Easily understood • Directive | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desirable and advantageous • Practical tool for reducing stress |
| Students beliefs about how podcasts shaped their ability to successfully engage with, and act on, assessment guidance and feedback | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increases understanding of requirements • Increases confidence • More predictability • Informs feed forward | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarification from an appropriate source • Able to compare own performance to others | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Good guide to follow • Allows them to 'correct' their work | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less isolated • More relaxed • Increases self-esteem |