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PODCASTING THROUGH THE PANDEMIC: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS AND PERFORMANCE AT AN ODL INSTITUTION

Oleh:

Kershnee Sevnarayan
University of South Africa
esevark@unisa.ac.za

Abstract: The pandemic has prompted the use of supplemental learning tools such as podcasts to become increasingly used to bridge the gap between lecturers and students. This paper argues that podcasting not only sharpens students' listening skills but also enables them to engage with content more efficiently. This paper is underpinned by the transactional distance theory and the community of inquiry theory to understand the role of podcasting in teaching and learning in distance education. In an attempt to decrease transactional distance, this case study evaluates students' perceptions of the implementation of podcasts in one South African ODL university, as an example, and investigates the effectiveness of using podcasts as a supplemental teaching tool in an English language module. The findings suggest that supplemental learning does decrease the transactional distance between lecturers-students and students-content. Moreover, the study found that podcasts tend to foster a teaching, social and cognitive presence that forms a community of inquiry. This paper concludes by providing pedagogical recommendations for teacher and student development in distance education contexts.

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A. INTRODUCTION

When the Coronavirus (Covid-19) became a pandemic in March 2020, Distance Education (DE) became the norm in schools and most Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). DE is form of education where the students are geographically separated from the institution and their lecturers. DE offers many benefits compared to contact HEIs, including enhanced flexibility, lower costs, improved access to linguistic barriers and increased admission access. However, DE institutions does come with its challenges such as increased

isolation and segregation, which can lead to attrition (Nunan, 2012; Schreiber & Jansz, 2019). The limited face-to-face contact can lead to what Moore (1993) calls an increase in 'Transactional Distance' (TD) (Swart & Macleod, 2021). The theory of TD first developed in the 1980s and refers to the psychological distance between lecturers and students (Moore, 1993; Quong et al., 2018). To narrow the TD in DE institutions, the literature points towards need for a teaching, social and cognitive presence (Arbaugh, 2008; Garrison, 2008; Garrison, Cleveland-Innes & Fung,

2010). DE is not novel to Open and Distance Learning (ODL) institutions but the pandemic meant that lecturers had to consider new ways to teach despondent students during the lockdown (Dhawan, 2020). Despite attempts in the literature to understand how podcasting enhances meaningful learning in DE contexts, the researcher has noted that there is lack of research focusing on the students' perspectives of podcasting as well as limited research in English language modules. For this reason, this case study adds to the existing body of literature in its attempt to understand students' perspectives towards podcasting during the pandemic as well as to understand how this e-learning tool affects students' performance in one English language module under study. An objective of this study was to ascertain students' perceptions of the podcasts they have received as a supplemental learning tool. A key aspect of this study is the effect of podcasting on the students' performance. A vital element in this study is how lecturers and practitioner in DE can use podcasting to decrease the TD by enhancing social, teaching and cognitive presence through podcasting.

The rapid growth of online DE through the pandemic has not only prompted lecturers and teachers to utilise

digital educational resources but also to consider "how to make principled choices among technology options" (Dhawan, 2020; Doughty & Long, 2003, p.67; Kumar, 2021). The nature of the problem confronted by ODL students who speak English as an additional language (EAL) is that there is no face-to-face contact with lecturers during the pandemic and there are feelings of isolation, which were brought on by the pandemic. In a traditional DE setting (e.g. students' homes), students may only understand a complex issue they have read briefly (from their study guides and textbooks) before the next topic is introduced. In contrast, podcasts can be listened to several times or paused to provide time for the student to process the information (Mobasheri & Costello, 2020). Furthermore, the researcher has noted a lack of social and teaching presence in other modules in the research context and has decided to play a more active role in the ENG2612 module that has begun in January 2020. The pedagogical tool that was the most popular amongst students was the podcasts and this paper seeks to find out what second year students' attitudes towards podcasts are in the ENG2612 module as well as to investigate the effectiveness of the podcasts on students'

learning. For this reason, podcasts were utilised as an e-Learning tool as an attempt to bridge the TD gap between lecturers-students and students-content (Moore, 1993). Moreover, podcasts were used to enhance the teaching, social and cognitive presence in the module under study to narrow the TD gap. In addition, while a few studies (Chan, Chi, Chin & Lin, 2011; Panagiotidis, 2021; Parsons, 2021) have investigated the role of podcasting in language learning, there is still limited research regarding students' perceptions of podcasting in DE as well as the effect on students' results. For this reason, this paper seeks to answer the two research questions below:

What are the perceptions of first year students on the implementation of podcasts in the applied English language module during the pandemic?

What effect did podcasting have on students' performance in the applied English language module?

This study is conducted in one of the largest mega universities in South Africa with an enrolment of over 350 000 students per year. ENG2612, a Bachelor of Education module in the College of Human Sciences, is an English home language module that prepares students for the work of teachers of the English language. The

ENG2612 module is an applied language studies module where the emphasis is on the application of what students will learn about critical reading and writing processes to develop their competencies in analysing a variety of literary and non-literary texts. The module registers a mixture of both home or first language speakers of English and EAL speakers.

Until the advent of television and the radio, podcasting has had a major improvement on language learning (Rosell-Aguilar, 2007; Panagiotidis, 2021). A podcast is a digital file that is recording by using a recorder, a computer or a mobile device. This file is uploaded onto a site or platform and is available for users like students to download. Several factors have contributed to the popularity of podcasts in DE such as its "ease of production, low cost, portability, flexibility in time, location, pacing, their convenience for both creator and listener, the growing and widespread use of mobile devices, the adoption of podcasting by major media broadcasters as a way of delivering [catch-up] services" (Rosell-Aguilar, 2013; Panagiotidis, 2021, p.10709). In addition, podcasts are attractive for their flexibility in offering bite-sized opportunities for teaching and learning. This explains their popularity in

education when they were introduced, as students and lecturers constantly look to new ways of teaching and learning.

After extensive literature reviews on students' perspectives and performance in relation to the use of podcasts in DE have been carried out, it was revealed that there are not a many studies which discuss this issue. This prompted the researcher to study the use of podcasts in education as a supplementary learning tool in an ODL or DE context. The researcher realises that there is a need to fill in this knowledge gap to the practical side of podcasting as a number of studies have been conducted in contact sessions but a few exists for DE learning contexts. A few studies have been conducted globally that show that the implementation of podcasts can yield improved results. The Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2020 found that podcasts had globally grown significantly in the last year (Newman et al., 2020). The report noted that in the 40 countries surveyed, half of all respondents said that podcasts provided more depth than other types of media.

One prevalent perspective on podcasts in that first, educators and students may misuse it. This notion suggests that podcasts can be seen as a

replacement of lectures and that printed media may be neglected. Second, it is argued that podcasts have minimum impact on cognition, epistemological access, and learner performance (Williams, Aguilar-Roca & O'Dowd, 2016, p.1). This paper investigates the validity of these arguments. I will explore two key ideas: the students' perceptions towards podcasts in ENG2612 as well as their performance as a result of using podcasts as a supplementary learning tool.

In some countries like New Zealand and Australia, university closures came within days of the Covid-19 lockdown. This meant that educators had limited time to create content resources and avail it online. Lecturers then created informal podcasts once a week and posted in online. According to Wake, Fox and Strong (2020, p.30):

The New Zealand university students said it was comforting hearing a familiar voice, even if it was a dry lecture on communication theory or emotional engagement theory. They got to know the educator in the weeks before the lockdown, so it was soothing. It was normalizing. This view was echoed by the Australian students, who were given video lectures but predominately listened rather than watched the content.

In Uganda, Kaahwa, Zhu and Muhumuza (2019) investigated the satisfaction of students with podcasts as a medium of instruction. In their study, all lectures were delivered through the radio as students had no direct contact with lecturers. Other than listening to podcasts, students received no other learning materials. Data was collected by means of a survey, naturalistic observation and face-to-face interviews were used to collect data from a sample of 211 undergraduate and graduate students. The findings indicated that there was no significant difference between male and female participants. However, the observation and interviews revealed that students found listening to podcasts a fun activity as it increased their listening skills.

Most of the articles in South Africa cover podcasting in the media, medicine and other disciplines. I was unable to find articles that sought to investigate the effectiveness of podcasts in an English module in South Africa. This paper will attempt to address that gap. However, Wentzel and de Hart (2020) have investigated the use of videocasts by tertiary Accounting students in a DE institution in South Africa. Similar to this paper, their study reported on students' attitudes towards podcasts as a student

support tool and data was collected by means of a survey. A videocast or vodcast is like a podcast but it uses images and video. A podcast is auditory. The study found the majority of students perceived videocasting as having value, as this initiative provided them with additional support and helped them to understand the content more easily (Wentzel & de Hart, 2020). It would be interesting to investigate the use of podcasting in applied English language module in DE.

Community of Inquiry theory for an inclusive teaching approach

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) theory for online learning by Garrison et al. (2000) consists of three interdependent elements at the heart of the educational experience: social presence, teaching presence and cognitive presence, which is illustrated in Figure 1. There is a fourth element, emotional presence, which this paper will briefly touch on.

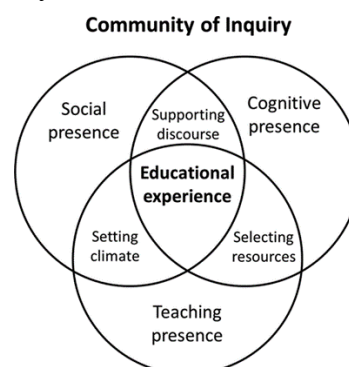


Figure 1. Community of inquiry (CoI) theory

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Having a social presence means the ability of lecturer and students to present themselves as 'real people' through a communication medium. Richardson and Swan (2003) found that social presence positively affects student and instructor course satisfaction. In his study, it was found that students who perceived high social presence learned more than those who perceived low social presence. Social presence strengthens the online community of learning, creates a sense of self-learning and interdependence and promotes the sharing of ideas between students and lecturers.

Cognitive presence indicates that students have the ability to construct and confirm meaning through reflection (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001). Reflection is a key aspect of the CoI theory and helps students to increase the cognitive presence. Since cognitive presence reflects higher-order learning, as well as the obtaining and application of knowledge (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001, p.7), the idea is that the podcasting addition to teaching and learning follows what is reflected by the cognitive presence. Through the implementation of podcasts, it is hoped that students can build and affirm knowledge through supported discourse in a community of learning (Garrison et al., 2001,

p.11).

How students are taught by lecturers will determine whether they will grasp the content cognitively. Teaching presence, then, is the design, facilitation and direction of social and cognitive processes. It is how a lecturer would facilitate discourse (setting the course climate, acknowledging student contributions) and direct instructions (summarise discussions, present content, pose questions, etcetera). Since "all participants could contribute to the teaching presence" (Garrison, 2011, p.62), both students and lecturers may be actively influential and not only wait at the receiving end.

CoI is deemed as an appropriate theory for promoting an inclusive teaching and learning environment that is conducive to facilitating an interactive learning environment for DE students. As such, this paper explores the use of CoI to facilitate students' performance and to identify students' perceptions of the use of podcasting in the module under investigation. This paper focuses on all elements of the CoI to understand students' interaction with podcasts for successful teaching and learning, as well as student support. Over the last two decades, CoI (Garrison, 2008; Garrison et al., 2000) has helped lecturers in DE decrease

transactional distance and increase student engagement (Wang & Liu, 2019) and success in online courses. This study addresses teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence, concepts which are positively linked to increased student participation, perceived learning in online courses, and a sense of community (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Arbaugh, 2008; Garrison et al., 2010). This paper examines all three presences as a mechanism for mitigating transactional distance, which is discussed next, and increasing student engagement in the implementation of podcasts.

1. Moore's theory of transactional dis-

tance

Transactional Distance (TD) is an influential concept in DE, coined by Moore (1993), which refers to the degree of the psychological distance between the students and the lecturer. It suggests that, even though space and time is the most prominent characteristic of DE, TD is the guiding principle in this context which influences the process of teaching and learning (Moore & Kearsley, 2011). The figure below illustrates TD as a set of variables that can be grouped into three main categories: Structure, Dialogue and Autonomy of the student (Moore, 1993):

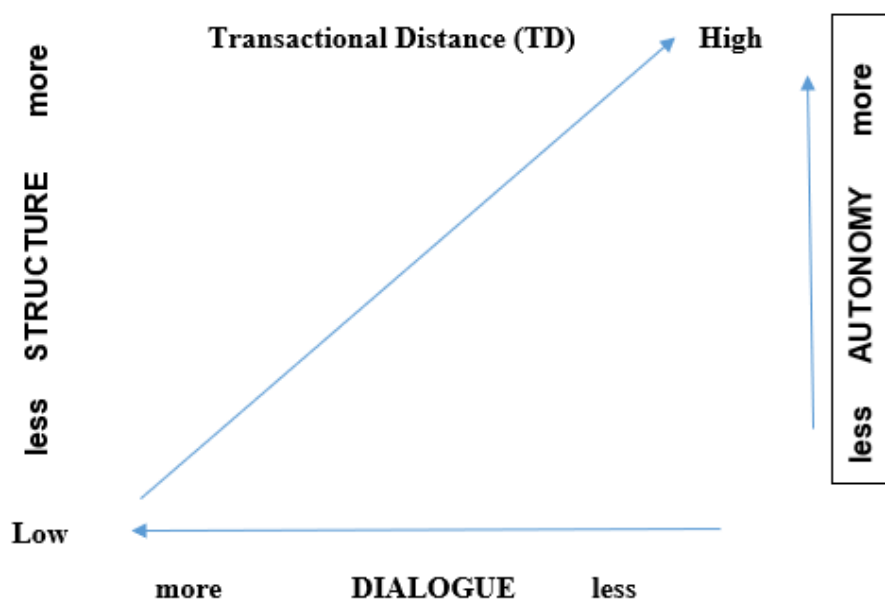


Figure 2. Illustration of Moore's theory of transactional distance

Structure refers to course elements such as learning objectives, content and assessments. More structure tends to increase TD as it diminishes the amount of flexibility for learners to chart their learning paths; however, less structure does not automatically mean reduced TD. Dialogue refers to communication between lecturers and students. More dialogue has a tendency to decrease TD. Autonomy (or student autonomy) refers to the extent that students' role in exercising self-management is that they get to decide what, how and how much to learn. The level of autonomy required of students increases TD resulting from the given structure and dialogue increases. Since not all students will have the same level of autonomy or capacity for self-management, the right amounts of structure and dialogue need to influence the overall course design. It is important to note that increased structure, autonomy and low dialogue may lead to an increased TD, as illustrated in Figure 2.

TD is made up of three components: student-student, student-teacher and student-content interaction. As the quantity and quality of these interactions increase, TD decreases (Yilmaz & Keser, 2017; Zhang, 2003). As the TD decreases, students gain more interactive learning experiences in DE (Zhang, 2003). This pa-

per argues that podcasts can be a useful tool in decreasing the TD between students-lecturers and student-content. For example, during Covid-19, as result of lockdowns and new strains of the virus, face-to-face contact between lectures and students are limited. Students in DE struggled to grapple with the content in their tutorial letters and study guides on their own. To improve this situation, students download and listen to the podcasts in their own time and may understand the content better. In this case, the implementation of podcasts may improve the student-lecturer and student-content interaction. As student-lecturer and student-content interaction increases, TD decreases (Yilmaz & Keser, 2017). Through an analysis of the literature review, the assumption is that the implementation of podcasts may decrease the TD in the module under study.

B. METHODOLOGY

The investigation into the use of podcasts by second-year applied English students took the form of a qualitative research design by utilising online open-ended evaluation questions, which were posted on the myUnisa Learning Management System (LMS). Screenshots from the statistics sections of the LMS and the XMO spreadsheet were analysed and noted on a structured observation

schedule. Case study is the research design. The open-ended evaluation questions and structured observation schedules were used to answer two research questions. In this paper, the case study design seeks to understand the perceptions of students during the pandemic, as well as to understand the effect podcasting had on them during this period (Davey, 2009).

1. Demographics of the participants

The student participants were a mix of English home language and English additional language speakers in the ENG2612 module, located in the Department of English Studies at Unisa. The rationale for selecting students from the ENG2612 as participants in the study is to understand their perceptions of using podcasts during the pandemic as well as to determine its effectiveness. Most students at Unisa struggle to access the resources posted on the LMS due to the lack of access to data, devices, electricity and so on. As a result, not all students answered the evaluation questions posted on the LMS.

2. Population of the sampled participants

The study was conducted with second year English Studies students who were registered for the 2020 and 2021 academic years in the ENG2612 module.

These students were provided with podcasts, videos, weblinks, an active discussion forum, constant announcements which alerted them when resources were uploaded as well as announcements of encouragement and motivation. An open-ended online evaluation form was posted onto the discussion forum site for all students to answer over the past two years. In 2020, 383 students were registered in the module but only 10 students answered the evaluation questions. In 2021, 791 students were registered and 18 students answered the questions. In total, 28 students answered the questions over the two-year period. This number of students is too small to generalise the results but the qualitative nature of this action study provides in-depth and valuable insights regarding the outcome of the study.

3. Data collection and analysis

To understand the students' perceptions of podcasts, data was collected through open-ended evaluation questions that were posted on the ENG2612 discussion forum on the LMS at the end of the 2020 and 2021 academic years. A structured observation schedule was used to understand the effect podcasting had on students' performance in the module. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data and the following

themes emerged out of the two research questions:

- a. Students' perceptions of podcasts during the pandemic
- b. The effect of podcasting on students' performance

C. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Students' perceptions of podcasts during the pandemic

In relation to the first research question, which sought to understand the ENG2612 students' perceptions of the podcasts they received, all 28 students who answered the open-ended evaluation questions over the past two years favoured the use of podcasts. On being asked if students enjoyed the podcasts that were created to support them during the pandemic, students responded:

I enjoyed working with the podcasts at my own pace as I work a full time job. We could hear that our lecturers care for us and that they want us to succeed. It is not like other modules I have studied. In this module, we can tell that our lecturers genuinely care. This was appreciated especially because of the devastation that Covid-19 caused. We needed to stay in touch through the podcasts and I believe this got us through the year. This care is very rare in a university where we don't see our lecturers (Carol, 2020 evaluation).

Yes, I enjoyed the podcasts as they were quick and the lecturers sound very enthusiastic. Moreover, they gave thorough clarity on the confusing aspects and their explanations helped me while I was preparing for the assignments and the examination. The guidance and support we received in the podcasts were unmatched. I especially enjoyed the motivation podcasts, it came at a time when it was needed most (Esme, 2021 evaluation).

It is quite humbling and encouraging to have such podcasts that boost our confidence and to come across lecturers who want their students to succeed. You explained everything perfectly and I understood every word you said. The podcasts made it easy for me to work at my own pace as my dad passed away with Covid and my family was affected by the virus. I really appreciate your effort and the belief that you have in us as students (Liam, 2020 evaluation).

As can be seen in the responses above, most students agreed that podcasts are a fun, motivational and interesting learning media to learn English in DE. Students liked the podcasts as it encouraged flexibility in their studies; they were portable and easy to use. For Liam (2020 evaluation), the use of podcasts

encouraged flexibility in his studies as his family was affected by the Covid-19 virus. Another student, Tessa (2021 evaluation) similarly echoed that she is partially blind and that the podcasts made the content “more accessible” for her as reading through the study guide was a challenge. Kumar (2021, p.16) argues that isolation is imminent amongst DE students; although, its flexibility “may prove a big advantage and attractive option” further supports these findings. For Moore (1993), the flexibility and portability of podcasts would decrease TD by increasing student-lecturer and student-content interaction.

From the students responses above, podcasting was perceived as enjoyable as there was support, motivation and care from the lecturers: “This care is very rare in a university where we don’t see our lecturers” (Carol, 2020 evaluation). Students enjoyed the prospect of listening to their content instead of reading it and this made it ‘fun’. Many students mentioned that the podcasts included motivational and inspiring content that made them want to learn and succeed: “It is not like other modules I have studied. In this module, we can tell that our lecturers genuinely care” (Carol, 2020 evaluation). Arguably, when lecturers show an online presence through the resources they cre-

ate, they narrow the TD gap between themselves and the students. Arguably, the lecturers have shown an emotional presence, the fourth element in Garrison’s (2000) COI theory. Emotional presence occurs when lecturers express feelings and an affective side in a community of inquiry similar to the module under study. As a result, by show an affective or emotional presence through motivating and inspiring students through podcasts, lecturers encourage lecturer-student and student-content interaction (Moore, 1993).

Similarly, students found the podcasts motivating as we were in the midst of a pandemic and the reassuring voices of their lecturers throughout the years made studying the module more relatable and accessible. The lecturers increased dialogue through the dissemination of podcasts, which drew the students closer to the content; thus bridging the TD between the students and their lecturers and the students and their subject content (Moore, 1993). Scholars in New Zealand similarly noted that students found podcasts “comforting” during the pandemic as it created a “normalizing” atmosphere in a somewhat disruptive educational environment (Wake, Fox and Strong, 2020, p.30). However, for Huang et al. (2016), raising dialogue may not necessarily de-

crease TD as the lack of lecturer participation may complicate the association between high structure and dialogue and increase the TD. However, it is important to note again that TD varies in different instructional contexts, as it is a dynamic theory. A persistent and systematic interaction between a lecturer and student is essential to spark a motivation. Despite the argument raised by Huang et al. (2016), the lecturers in ENG2612 have provided continuous opportunities for dialogue or social interaction and 'appropriately' structured learning materials and activities and have reduced the TD in the module (Moore, 1993; Richardson & Swan, 2003). At this point, any interaction or communication is significant to decrease TD and increase teaching and learning in HEIs.

Students perceived the podcasts to be interesting as they were short and did not exceed 5 minutes in length. This allowed the lecturers to capture the attention of the students and thus, students were able to access epistemology with ease. Furthermore, the lecturers' voices were clear, their tone was optimistic and motivational and they simplified the content for students, which the students appreciated. For Esme (2021 evaluation), "they gave thorough clarity on the confusing aspects and their explanations helped me

while I was preparing for the assignments and the examination". Clearly, podcasts do help to bridge the gap between the complexities of the module content and the students' understandings.

To further explore the first research question regarding students' perceptions of podcasts during their year of study, students were asked if they found the podcasts helpful in preparing them for the examination. All 28 students who answered the questions responded in the affirmative. Below are some responses of the students in the open-ended evaluation questions:

I am more than confident that I'll do my best with my portfolio exam. I found some of the work in the study guides and tutorial letters difficult to understand but the podcasts broke everything down so nicely. I am ready for the exam. Thank you very much for the profound work that you have done (Bree, 2020 evaluation).

I was so scared at the thought of the exam, I am not good with essay writing and analysing pictures and texts, but you made it sound so easy when everything was explained step by step and how we could tackle certain questions (Thabo, 2021 evaluation).

The podcasts are a lifesaver! I honestly don't think I would have passed the

assignments or be as prepared as I am now for the examination without it. My only challenge was that because there were so many podcasts, it did consume a lot of my data and I did not end up downloading all the podcasts (Khwezi, 2021 evaluation).

The responses above are an indication that podcasts assisted the ENG2612 students with their formal assessments and preparation for the final examination. It seems as though the podcasts increased students' understandings, boosted their confidence and encouraged examination readiness. TD was decreased when Bree (2020 evaluation) noted that the content in the podcasts allowed her to understand the content of the module more easily. Thabo (2021 evaluation) similarly noted that he had challenges understanding essay writing and applying the module content to pictures and texts but after listening to the podcasts, he felt more informed on how to approach these tasks. However, from the literature it was noted that printed media might be neglected when podcasts are used. Secondly, Williams, Aguilar-Roca and O'Dowd (2016, p.1) argued that podcasts have minimum impact on cognition, epistemological access, and learner performance. Nevertheless, based on the voices highlighted above, even

though it is used as a supplemental learning tool, podcasting used in the ENG2612 module did benefit students' cognition (through encouraging understanding), epistemology (through boosting their confidence and thus acquiring information) and performance (through encouraging examination readiness). This means that the module content was well structured, dialogue was increased by using podcasts and autonomy has been decreased (Moore, 1993); thereby lowering the TD between lecturers- students and students-content.

This paper refutes a finding by Williams, Aguilar-Roca and O'Dowd (2016) by arguing that podcasts do not replace printed media such as study guide as most students do not refer to them as their main source of information. For Bree (2020) and other students who answered the evaluation questions, "I found some of the work in the study guides and tutorial letters difficult to understand but the podcasts broke everything down so nicely". This means that when students do not understand the content in their primary sources of information, podcasts are referred to a supplemental learning tool to support study guides, textbooks and tutorial letters. TD reaches its full potential when student- content and lecturer-student interaction is increased

(Schreiber & Jansz, 2019; Selvaras, 2019; Zhang, 2003).

One would argue that little to no access to data and internet connectivity, as expressed by Khwezi (2021 evaluation), increases the TD by closing the communication space and reducing the lecturer-student dialogue (Moore, 1993). Unfortunately, data costs are high in South Africa and bandwidth varies in different locations.

The effect of podcasting on students' performance

To answer the second research question, which seeks to understand the effect podcasting had on the ENG2612 students' performance, data was gathered after the examination results were captured through a structured observation schedule. Table 1 shows questions that were answered in the structured observation schedule:

Table 1. Structured observation schedule of the 2020 and 2021 academic year in ENG2612

<i>Structured observation schedule of the 2020 and 2021 ENG2612 module</i>	
Which section on the LMS were students most active on?	Students were most active in the additional resources on the myUnisa LMS. This is possibly because this thread offered supplemental support to explain content that students found challenging.
How active were students on the additional resources?	According to the LMS, students spent over 70 per cent of their time on the additional resources. The additional resources formed the most active section of the LMS.
Which resource were students mostly interested in?	Students were mostly interested in assignment feedback letters, podcasts, and videos.
How many podcasts were posted and which ones were the most popular?	8 podcasts were uploaded onto the additional resources. The examination, assignment and motivational podcasts were popular amongst students.
According to the XMO spreadsheet, how did students perform in the 2020 and 2021 ENG2612 examinations?	In 2020, 383 students were admitted into the examination. 360 students passed the examination, 15 students failed, 14 students were granted supplementary examinations and 8 students were absent. The pass percentage was 96 % and the fail percentage was 4%. In 2021, 791 students were admitted into the examination. 737 students passed the examination, while 20 failed. 34 students were absent during the examination.

The figure below demonstrates that the additional resources on the LMS was the most accessed amongst other sections such as the announcements and lessons. Students spent 71.3% of their time on the

additional resources, 17.1 % of lessons, 10% on web content, 0.5% reading the announcements and about 0.3 % scrolling through other minor sections of the site.

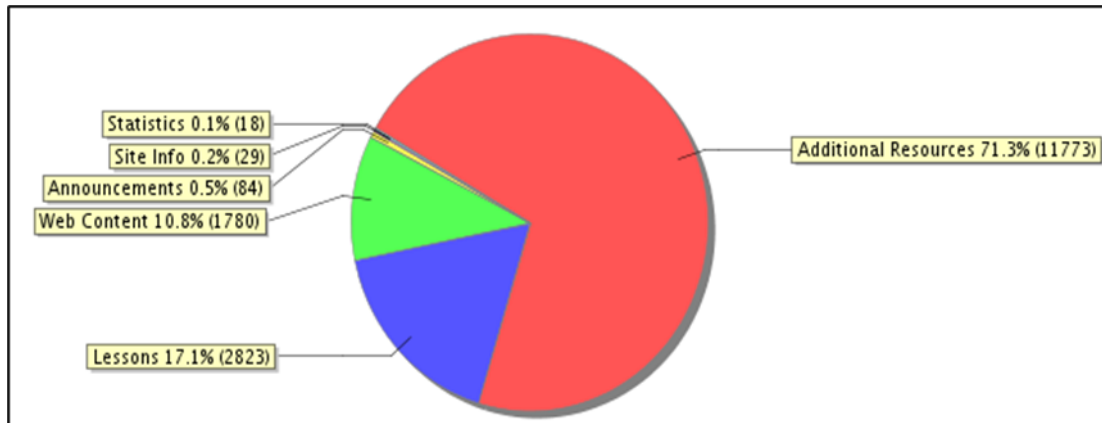


Figure 3. Screenshot of the statistics of the additional resources on ENG2612

It is clear from the figure above that students were mostly interested in downloading assignment feedback letters, podcasts and video files. It may be argued that the reason why the bulk of students spent their time on the additional resources is that the new generation of students are more proficient with technology. In this instance, podcasts, for the purpose of this paper, are a useful educational technology that can cater for students with auditory, visual and mixed

learning preferences. This is especially useful in the ENG2612 module, which teaches applied English language to students who may not speak English as their first language. These students need additional support and podcasts seem to be an attractive option that may enable them to access information with ease. The figure below is a screenshot, taken from the 2020 ENG2612 LMS site, and shows the number of students that have downloaded podcasts and other resources:

Resource	Total
2020 ENG2612 Assignment 2 Feedback.docx	283
ASSIGNMENT 3 PODCAST	274
ENG2612 Study Plan 2020 Final.docx	265
ASSIGNMENT 1 PODCAST	248
Read this, it will help you!.docx.pdf	246
ENG2612 Examination Tutorial Letter.docx	237
ENG2612 Exam Prep_ Question Paper Content.mp3	227
C:_Users_naidos2_Documents_2019_B Ed. Modules_ENG2612_FORMATTED UPLOADED TUTORIALS_Course Overview and Study Unit 1.pdf	216
Assignment 2	207
ENG2612 Exam Podcast PPT.pptx	200
This will help you!	187
Exam Preparation module review podcast	161
Structure of Academic Writing.mp4	145
ENG2612 Examination Discussion PPT.pptx	139
ENG2612-EXAM-DISCUSSION VIDEO.mp4	137
Basic Elements of Style.pdf	131
C:_Users_naidos2_Documents_2019_B Ed. Modules_ENG2612_FORMATTED UPLOADED TUTORIALS_Study Unit 2.pdf	129
Denotation and connotation	127
The difference between an argument and an assumption	126
How to download and upload your examination question paper (2).mp4	119

Figure 4. Screenshot of the additional resources on the LMS

It is interesting to note that out of 383 students, 274 students downloaded the assignment 3 podcast, 248 downloaded the assignment 1 podcast, 227 downloaded the examination preparation question paper podcast, 207 downloaded the assignment 2 podcast, 200 downloaded the examination podcast, 161 downloaded the module review podcast and 145 downloaded a podcast on how to structure their writing. These numbers are impressive as students download and share the podcasts on other platforms such as Whatsapp and Telegram. This means that students who access the podcast on other platforms may not download the podcast from the ENG2612 site; hence, the results in the figure above may not be a true reflection of the actual number of

students who have accessed the podcasts. As mentioned, many students do not have access to data and some students do not have access to smart phones, tablets and laptops. A lack of access to technological resources may further widen the TD gap between student and lecturers and students and their content. Despite some of the challenges that may have been experienced by the students, the pass percentage of the module was 96% in 2020. In 2021, podcasts were similarly uploaded onto the LMS and students similarly downloaded these podcasts eagerly. It is interesting to note that the pass percentage in 2021 was 97% with a higher student cohort than 2020 (see figure below):

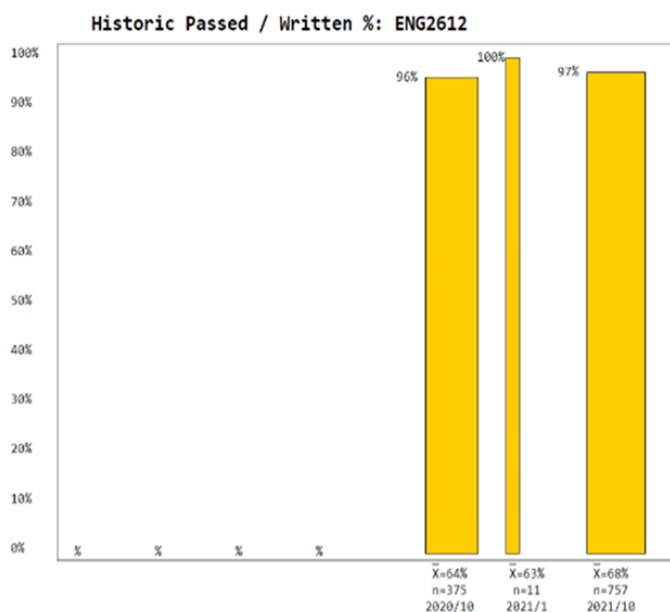


Figure 5. Historic pass rate in ENG2612 in 2020 and 2021

In Figure 5, it is clear that there has been a 1% pass rate increase from 96% in 2020 to 97% 2021. There could be many factors associated with this such as the more effective timing of the uploading of podcasts and more students were able to download or listen to the podcasts. It is also important to note that in 2021, the teaching team created a Telegram group for the students (which was not present in 2020). Arguably, the additional social presence of Telegram may have assisted in reducing the TD gap and increased social presence. However, the addition of Telegram does not form part of the scope of this paper. One may then ask, what is the link between the results of the module and the podcasts? Alternatively, what impact has the use of podcasts had on the students' performance? All 28 students who answered the open-ended evaluation questions over the two-year period were asked if they found the podcasts helpful in preparing them for the examination. All 28 students responded positively to the question. For one student, "The podcasts have prepared us for each assignment and the knowledge I have gained throughout has helped me in being ready for the exam. The podcasts were very helpful to prepare us for the exam. Without the podcasts, I would have really struggled" (Kylie, 2021 evaluation). Evi-

dently, from the students' voices in the previous section and Kylie's (2021 evaluation) response, it is clear that there is a link between the implementation of podcasts and the students' performance. All students who responded to the online open-ended evaluation questions confirmed that podcasting helped in preparing them for the examination. These findings were corroborated with the results from our XMO system after the examination results were released. It was found that the pass percentage was 96%, the highest percentage achieved in the department of English Studies in a module at the end of 2020. In 2021, the module attained a pass rate of 97%, the best performing module in the department. The difference between the ENG2612 module and the other modules was the constant teaching, social and emotional presence that was given throughout the year. We created podcasts to motivate our students, to prepare them for each assignment and the examination. Clearly, the facilitation of understanding was enhanced the cognitive presences of both students and lecturers, the teaching and social presences of the lecturers enhanced students' preparation for the examination and as a result impacted on the performance of students after the examination results were released. Clearly, this

assisted in reducing the TD between students-lecturers and students-content. The increase in dialogue, decreased structure

and autonomy (Moore, 1993) enabled the module lecturers to decrease the TD (see figure below):

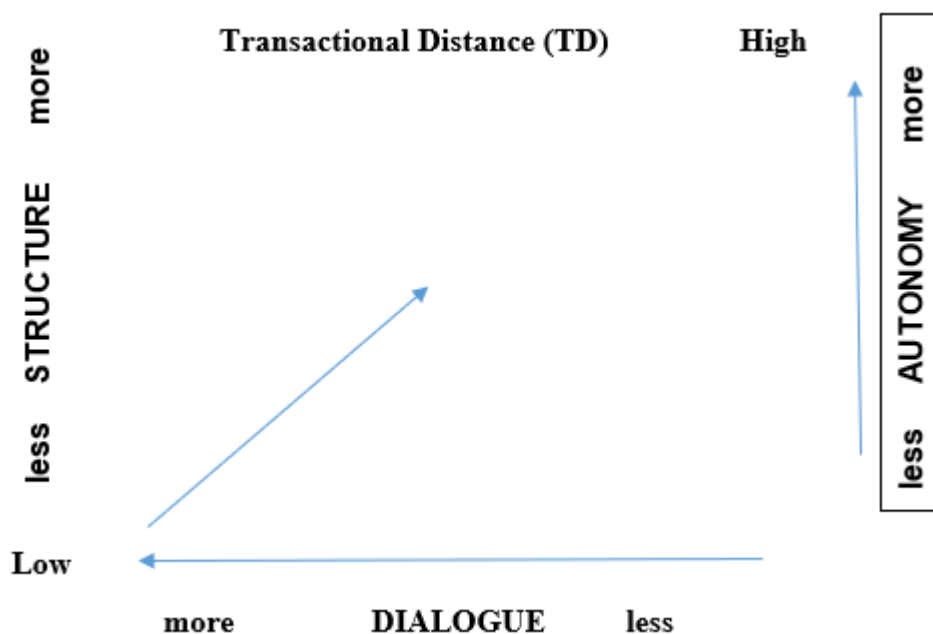


Figure 6. Illustration of transaction distance after the implementation of podcasts

TD has been significantly reduced in the figure above. The figure assumes that there are other methods and technologies that may be implemented to further reduce TD. These are discussed in the recommendations section of this paper.

D.LIMITATIONS AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This study was conducted in one applied English language module in one DE institution in South Africa. Further research from multiple universities might be important to analyse the use of podcasts, as this would increase our

knowledge of the overall perception, quality, use and impact of podcasts. This paper focused on students' perceptions of the use of podcasts in DE. Further research is needed to understand lecturers' perceptions and challenges of podcasting in DE. Further research on encouraging a community of inquiry approach and reducing TD in DE is encouraged by investigating the effects of the implementation of various eLearning technologies in more than one module and department. Before conducting the research, ethical clearance was applied for and granted by the university's ethics committee

(NHREC Registration Ref#: 2021_RPSC_050).

E.RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

As we observe so many radical changes during the pandemic, it is inevitable that teaching methods and technologies would continue to shift and change as well (Dhawan, 2020). Despite the flexibility offered by podcasts, podcasts are not the only supplemental learning tool that can assist in reducing TD and encouraging a teaching, social, cognitive and emotional presence. This aim of this paper was to understand students' perceptions of podcasting through the pandemic in an applied English language module. Based on the findings, which were discussed in the previous section, the following recommendations were made:

It is recommended that podcasts be used as a supplemental tool to support learning and it should not replace the main teaching such as face-to-face, zoom, Teams' and conference calls with students. The main aim of a podcast is to expand students' knowledge on a topic and it is not meant to educate them with the same thoroughness in the way that lecturers are meant to teach. Technology is a tool that should be used to assist

practitioners in DE to meet the educational needs of all students (Palloff & Pratt, 2010).

The use of evaluations in podcasting should be an ongoing process within DE and ODL contexts. There is a need for useful and effective teaching and learning podcasts in English language teaching in online contexts, as most students do not speak the English as a first language. Hence, research must be carried out to guide the quality use of podcasts in DE institutions. This paper focused on students' perceptions of podcasts; however, it would be interesting to investigate students as participants on the quality of podcasts. "Students' feedback about the types of podcasts that they prefer can give lecturers an idea of the quality of the podcasts" (Makina, 2020: 39). Students' perceptions and challenges they experience with existing podcasts can further assist in understanding how podcasts can be improved. Moreover, the impact of the use of podcasts can further assist and guide researchers and lecturers to determine whether podcasts are valuable to the students.

Research in education on optimising teaching delivery through eLearning should be embarked on. Lecturers and practitioners in HEIs should be trained on a continual basis to create and disseminate

inate audio, sensory and visual media tools to cater for a diverse student population. There should be a focus on technological mastery for the post pandemic educational world. According to Iqbal and Campbell (2020; 2021), going with traditional eLearning is not going to benefit all students; consequently, there is a need for an augmented reality, artificial intelligence, machine learning that can assist DE institutions to maximise on remote teaching and learning. In some learning contexts, straight podcasting, video lecturing and conferencing does not help close the TD gap; there has to be a focus on personalised learning solutions for hands-on 'kinaesthetic' learning in resource-constrained environments (Iqbal, Campbell & Mangina, 2021). It would be interesting to observe how touchless interaction, artificial intelligence and machine learning can be used in English modules.

The findings indicate that podcasts enable epistemological access and make meaning clearer. The evaluation of students' perceptions of podcasts further revealed that it motivated them to prepare for their formal assessment tasks, which in turn had a positive effect of their final results. The implementation of the constant use of podcasts does assist in reducing TD between lecturers-

students and students-content (Moore, 1993). Furthermore, it created a community of inquiry, which enabled social, cognitive, teaching and emotional presences. Both theories in this paper worked together to benefit the students in a DE context. Further reflections and research is needed to find the best ways to leverage emerging supplementary support technologies like podcasts so that they can foster epistemological access, facilitate meaningful teaching and learning and support flexibility during and after the pandemic.

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