



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



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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 utilised 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 and 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.

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## 1. 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.

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## 2. 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).

### 2.1. 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.

### 2.2. 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.

### 2.3. 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.

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