

Transcript Interview 1: Students listen to podcasts for social justice in the classroom

Featuring Dr. Yalda Hamidi (YH), Ava Corey-Gruenes (AC), Dominik Drabent (DD), and Alexander Nellis (AN), interviewed by Abigail Bakke (AB)

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AB Welcome to the series on Podcasting for Social Justice, prepared for the International Journal of Equity and Social Justice in Higher Education. My name is Abigail Bakke and I'm interviewing instructors and students about the role podcasting plays in teaching and learning about social justice.

To learn more about the possibilities of assigning podcasts, I spoke with Dr. Yalda Hamidi, who teaches in the Gender and Women's Studies Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato and three graduate students, Ava, Dominik, and Alex, who assisted with the Sex and Gender Worldwide course taught by Dr. Hamidi. This interview demonstrates that having students listen to podcasts can help add a personal voice to course content, introduce new perspectives, and allow greater access.

OK, so first thing I'd like to hear is from each of you is just briefly describe your academic background and your relationship to the course. Yalda, maybe we'll start with you because you can kind of give the context on what the course was.

YH So I'm Yalda Hamidi, assistant professor of Gender and Women's Studies at Minnesota State University, Mankato and I use she/her pronouns. I'm also a faculty fellow for socially just classroom teaching for Equity 2030, which is an initiative that we hold onto dearly at Minnesota State University for promoting the ideas of diversity, inclusion and equity in our campuses. And I also serve on diversity, equity and inclusion committees for the last two years.

So the course that we're talking about today is Sex and Gender Worldwide, which is a 200-level course for Gender and Women's Studies department and because of my kind of unusual academic path, it was a course that really spoke to me very closely. I have a Master's in Social Sciences and almost a PhD in Sociology from my country, Iran. I came to United States in 2011 and I received two more Masters' in Gender and Women's Studies and Cultural Studies, and a PhD in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

And when I was hired at Minnesota State University, it looked like a miracle that they asked me to teach a course on Sex and Gender Worldwide, and I was thinking to myself that, OK, awesome. This course is going to bring all my experiences together and allow me not only to talk about what I learned on the American side about American feminism and Western ideas of womanhood, but also what I learned and lived on the other side of the world. So this was the beginning of designing the course, Sex and Gender Worldwide. This course has been taught on this campus over the past two years, for ten times, and I can say that every single time it's a new revision of the course. So this also shows how excited I am about revising and thinking through the course.

- AB I'm so glad you got to teach a course right away that fits so perfectly with your interests.
- AN Hi, my name is Alex. I go by he/him pronouns. I was a TA in the Sex and Gender Worldwide course. I created two weeks of course content on masculinity that I fully designed and created the assignments for.
- AC Hi, I'm Ava. I use she/they pronouns. I also TA'd for Sex and Gender Worldwide last semester and then I took it as a student the semester before.
- DD Hi, I'm Dominik, I use he/him pronouns. For me, so I'm also a graduate student in Gender and Women's Studies. I have served on different committees, including the Equity and Inclusion Council at Minnesota State and I have been a student in this course. I have been a teaching intern. I have been a guest lecturer. I have been a teaching assistant and her research assistant, so I have seen all the different versions of the course and I can say that it's always something new and I still learn something new and I really like that. And I also have created modules. I have created a different version of the course, specifically focusing on the Middle East, so I'm really familiar with her course and also different usages of materials that come with it.
- AB And I love how you each bring that dual perspective of having been a student and also having been on the teaching side of it and so I'm glad you're all able to be here. OK, You did describe the course you taught already, but Yalda, How do podcasts fit into it? Why did you choose to assign podcasts?

YH I'm an avid listener. I love listening to podcasts and audiobooks. And I became kind of a very serious listener while I started commuting for my last job, which was teaching at the Stony Brook campus, located about 70 miles away from my home, which at the time was in Queens, NY. During two years of commuting and driving back and forth, I would say that I listened to hundreds of hours of podcasts. And as a teacher, one of the questions that I carry with myself all the time, so for every single material that comes across my attention, I ask myself, how can I incorporate that to my class? How can I make that useful for my students? And I think there is a term for that; they call it teachers' brain. We're thinking about our students even when we are sleeping. So that was the seed of incorporating podcasts into my courses.

But then also pandemic hit as soon as I was hired at Minnesota State and I had to work with the limits that my students had. I was looking for the platforms that are accessible to all the students, including the ones who were trying to reach out our classes to rural Wi-Fi or they had problems with having high speed Internet for financial purposes, so this was the beginning. But as I incorporated here and there a few podcasts in some of the versions of the course, my students responded to that very well and they told me that they liked listening to podcasts and then later in the fellowship that I did for socially just classroom, it came to my attention that actually podcasts matter highly because of the accessibility level that they provide.

And also because of how they make our pedagogic strategies more relevant and culturally sustainable to students. So, for example, imagine that on this midsize campus we have about 12,000 students if I'm right. We have the students who are coming from oral cultures. So their learning is mostly focused on their listening abilities. And I also have students who spend a lot of time working outside campus. So in addition to making the course more culturally responsive for students who enjoyed listening more than other activities such as watching or reading, it came to my attention that my students listen to these podcasts while serving tables, making some money, folding the laundry, taking care of their elders at the household, and the more I put podcasts into the course, the more students got back to me with their feedback and I appreciated that.

And I understand that podcasts could be not for everybody, but the rule for me in the class is having at least something for everybody. So I always ask my students if there is at least something in the course that they like and I would say that it's my understanding the majority of the students really appreciated podcasts, so their feedback actually enhanced my initial motivations for incorporating podcasts and podcasts became a serious part of every single week of my syllabus.

AB How do you ask students to actually engage with the podcasts? What does the assignment or the homework look like?

YH So let me, in response to that question, talk about the, some of the updated versions of the course, because as I said we, I changed it quite often. So the course as it is taught right now is flipped based on all our materials and some of the free available visual and listening materials such as the podcasts we talked about. And it's also highly discussion based, so we teach this course in four 50-minute increments and we save one of those for students to watch their visual materials on their own and that happens usually at the end of the week, so our students meet us fresh the first day of the week, which is usually Monday. And they are supposed to know all the materials required in the course. We have a discussion day and on that discussion day I always share with asking about their emotions and their body expressions toward the materials. Because as a feminist pedagogue I value incorporating bodies and bodily reactions and emotions into the course.

We have a day that we call it "teach your classmate day" and that usually starts in week three to four when the students are ready and feel confident about their teaching and that's the day that the students pick some of the materials that's assigned to them, including podcasts, and come back to their class and teach their own classmates. And we also have a day that we call it "interactive lecture day" and on that lecture day, me or one of my assistants cover some of the material that did not come up during the three days of discussion, teach your classmate days, and the day that the students watched or listened on their own.

Students are supposed to respond to one discussion board at least weekly. So they discuss with us the material as they gathered and they processed them in response to all the reading, visual materials, and the podcasts. And there are exams and there are also some reflections that they locate themselves and their understanding in response to the material they learned in the course, but I would say that discussion boards are some of the most important assignments, and that's where we hear student voices. And how they respond to the podcasts.

AB Thank you for that context. Anyone else have something to add about how students engage with the podcasts or what you've observed from participating as a TA?

AN I mean, it's kind of been brought up before, but I think there were definitely students in the discussion boards that would like disagree with the readings, but they would change their opinions when they heard the podcast or they'd say, I didn't really disagree, or I didn't really agree with what this author was saying, but hearing this experience changed what I thought about this issue and made me think about it in a different way, so I think that's really important to kind of have like that contrast and comparison of the readings and podcasts and that those assignments kind of allowed for students' opinions to change.

AB OK, well this is a great time to hear from the student perspective and if you can even think of a specific podcast episode or series that stood out to you and what made it work for you, that might be interesting to share as well. So students, how was listening to podcasts? How did it help you feel more included as a student? how did it help you learn about social justice topics?

AC I think what Yalda said was really accurate. It's important to have lots of different options for formats for students to consume content from disability and cultural perspectives, and also to let students who have a lot going on consume the content while also taking care of their other responsibilities. I also really like how podcasts often have a more conversational tone that's a lot more easily digestible than reading like academic papers, but it still communicates the same content if it's done well. So yeah, I think, it's really useful for that reason.

There was one podcast from the Body Politics unit I think, and it was a 15 Minutes of Feminism episode about sports politics ("Fifteen Minutes of Feminism"), and I think that students connected with that really well because it was a topic that students could relate to and it brought in like current events too and talked about it in a way that was understandable and let students bridge theory with current examples. Yeah, I thought that worked really well.

AB I love your comment about the conversational tone too, because that's something that I really love about podcasts is I can enjoy myself while learning. Not that I don't enjoy learning, but I mean sometimes things just need to have a little bit of humor added or, or that personal touch, that personal voice that you don't always get with other types of resources. Alex or Dominik, anything to add?

- AN I would add on to Ava's point about kind of it making it more accessible and like bridging between readings. So I think even the students that did do well with the readings and understood them, it kind of like supplemented it with adding something like from current events, because textbooks aren't like always able to be like the most up-to-date whereas podcasts are able to kind of have that conversation about things that might be currently going on that students are interested in. So yeah, I really like kind of that bridging aspect between readings and podcasts.
- DD I would also add in my opinion, one big advantage of podcasts is that you can adjust the speed. And so, depending on what kind of activity or schedule you have, you can adjust it. But also you know if you don't mind that they speak quicker and it doesn't become awkward necessarily, whereas like if you do that with video, it can be really weird to see the motion and the picture. So I really enjoy this because sometimes personally they're speaking too slow for me and it just drags out the time. So I can adjust it, but it's also nice for people that might actually need the extra time to process the information.
- AB That's a great point too, I hadn't thought of that. It's another way that podcasts are accessible. So you've spoken from, from the student side, as TAs, did you hear any of the feedback about the podcasts, or did you notice enthusiasm around them among the students that you were TAing?
- DD I don't have a specific moment, but I do think in general, as students really bring positive feedback about podcasts back to the classroom, so I remember a lot of times that people say I really enjoyed listening to podcasts. I really found this was an interesting topic. It was engaging. I think part of that comes with the conversational part that Ava mentioned, you know it's like multiple people engaging, so it's really more like you're eavesdropping to like a conversation rather than you, just like have a monologue going on.
- AN I guess another thing I would add to that is that we had weekly discussion posts in the class that the students did, and I think when there were those students that maybe weren't able to understand certain readings as well, I noticed they really connected the concepts to the podcast really well, or they could point out this podcast talked about this current event and then they were still able to get it through the podcast, whereas they may not have had as strong of an argument with the reading.

- AC I would agree with that I think generally, the podcasts that we were listening to were quite a bit longer than a lot of the readings we were assigning, and it was generally difficult to expect students to do like a 15-page reading or something, but you could ask them to do like a 30-minute podcast episode to listen to and they were more likely, I think, to listen to the podcast than to read the entire 30 pages, or however much that would translate to if it were written down.
- AB That's really good to know because I have been wondering if college students listen to podcasts, kind of on their own naturally, if that's something that they would already be interested in, or whether they tend to get introduced to them in the context of a class. So I guess I'd like to hear from you, do you listen to podcasts? OK, I'm seeing nods. Because I know I'm a millennial and I have a feeling that people around my age, podcasts are just, you know part of our life and Yalda, what you were saying about listening on the commute, it's just I love that ability to listen while doing something else. So as college students, what do you do while you listen to podcasts?
- AC I definitely listen to podcasts whenever I'm doing domestic labor or walking. Usually I wouldn't sit down to listen to a podcast, but if I'm doing something I need to do anyway, it's a really good time to get extra value out of that time.
- DD Yes, I agree with Ava. I usually do it when I'm even folding laundry or cooking, some of like of the house chores. And I do think just to go back to the question before that is actually adding some extra value to the students. And that's why they're focusing on podcasts because I would agree that in a lot of the grading you can see that most of the students listened to the podcast, but maybe not all had the time to do the other materials. And so it's also really wise to choose a podcast that is summarizing something and not just like going into a specific aspect, because usually students tend to actually listen to the podcasts.
- AN I would agree with everything that Ava and Dominik said. I would add I've occasionally listened to them while driving as well and I think kind of all the stuff everybody has said that I would agree with. That it was more like students could listen to it while they were doing other things, whereas you have to be very involved with the reading and you can't just like do it while you're doing something else.
- AB Exactly, it requires that extra level of focus.

YH This course Sex and Gender Worldwide is a story-based course and there is a very strong intention behind that. So there are so many courses about women of the world, transnational perspective on women, but unfortunately, in the context of the US, when we look at those courses, it's mostly white and Western women talking about other women versus different women bringing on their stories. And because of that I decided that this course which is also a lower level course, accessible and somehow required for all the students on this campus for multiple requirement that it satisfies, is going to be a course that is story-based.

So we start the class with a TED Talk by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, "The danger of a single story." That 20 minute TED Talk, which actually explained to students why they cannot rely seriously on one story that they have in their own mind and learn through their education, their high school education, from their own community, or people they so far have interacted with them, cannot be a reliable base for understanding other people. So stories become a very important part of this course because they just break that kind of monologue, and we want the casual conversation aspect of the podcast, or its trendiness, or whatever it offers because we want our students to have a dynamic understanding of different elements.

So next to a serious academic reading, we mostly have a podcast. We also do use a lot of visual stuff, mostly documentaries, because we want to provide a multidimensional narrative of one particular topic so that the student can understand the nuances, and I think podcasts have been a serious element to that multi dimensionality.

AB It sounds like with podcasts you can get that personal voice, that story directly from the storyteller versus, like you were saying, somebody talking about someone else or talking in an abstract way about something. And Yalda or others, is there a particular podcast series that you think captures that storytelling aspect really well?

AN We used the Ms. Magazine podcast quite a bit in our course, and I think that worked out really well. I think the students really liked that and just kind of the variety of stories. It wasn't just all from academic authors like you would when you were doing a reading or whatever, it was all people of all sorts of backgrounds, and I'd also add, too, to the previous question that I think it's good that you can kind of hear the emotion in their voice in a podcast, whereas if you're just doing a reading it can come off kind of flat and you don't get kind of that personal connection that you get while actually hearing somebody directly tell you their story orally.

- YH On the Issues with Michelle Goodwin, the podcast, that's actually made and broadcasted by Ms. Magazine and the Feminist Majority Foundation in this country is actually one of the quickest ways for students to get to the trendiest issues on the horizon from a feminist perspective. And I really like that podcast, and it happens to me sometimes that in the middle of the course I just take out one episode that was produced maybe a couple of months back and put something new in because they are so quick in responding in what's happening on the ground. And I think my students who are absolutely younger than me are more sensitive to the timeliness of the issues, and I'm hearing this in the team that worked with me. And I think it's a very reliable issue that the trendiness and responding to the moment was an element that the students really appreciated about these podcasts.
- AB I do have one final question and this is open to everyone. What would you recommend for instructors hoping to use podcasting for social justice in their courses?
- AC My biggest thing would probably be making sure that transcripts are included along with the podcast, just to make it accessible to everyone. And also some people, I have heard feedback from at least one person that they do like being able to look through and highlight things which is a little bit difficult on podcasts. But including as many formats as possible as options is really beneficial.
- AB Yeah, that's an excellent point. You can't use a search function in a, in an audio form, and so having the transcript in addition is a really important piece.
- AC Transcripts also make it a lot easier to cite podcasts.
- AN Okay I just was going to add that I think including a, making sure you include like a variety of voices and you're not just doing like all one podcast from the same host for example, or like all from the same perspective or same, like racial or gender, whatever identities. I think it's really important to include diversity of voices in podcasts so that students can be exposed to multiple different perspectives and experiences.
- YH One other thing, it's not exactly in response to this question. One other thing that I do with podcasts for my own career is listening to the podcasts produced by professional people in the field and especially publications. So for example, there are series of podcasts, new books in different academic disciplines, and I listen to New Books in Gender, New Books in Middle Eastern Studies. And these are the podcasts that actually in a span of an hour I decide whether or not I need to put a book on my reading list.

And when I'm working with graduate students on their thesis, this is the other thing that I do, so I have, I had a student working on Afghanistan this past year with me, so I would send her new books on Afghanistan for her to be able to quickly see the new material published on the topic and see whether or not that material would be a good fit for her scholarly research.

And the other thing that I do, because I identify as an academic feminist, I follow the feminist podcasters that are important for the field. And some of those depending on the topic and whether or not they are appropriate for the time found their way into my classes. So for example, I listen to the Signs podcast, Ask a Feminist which is, which incorporates some of the biggest voices in the field of Women and Gender Studies in America. I also listen to She Speaks Academic Muslimah, which is a specific podcast by academic Muslim feminists in the US and in the West who come from different backgrounds and it really nuances the identities of the Muslim women identifying as also feminist for listeners. And I would easily see myself incorporating any of those if we come up with a new iteration of the course for sex and gender in the Muslim world or among Muslim communities. So these are all different ways that I rely on podcasts to keep myself updated and to push my graduate the students to reach to some of the newest materials in the field.

AB Well that comes to the end of the prepared questions I had. Well Yalda was right, you're all brilliant. I'm so glad that you all were able to be so involved with what sounds like an amazing course, and best of luck with the graduate degrees. Yalda, excellent work too designing and revising what sounds like a course that's really relevant and important for students.

YH I really appreciate this opportunity and I, let me say that I very much appreciate every single person here. It's not that I designed the course and my assistant execute that, they are definitely an important part of revising and reflecting on the course and bringing to my attention what I cannot see on my own. And during the years that I worked with these wonderful people, I continuously learn from them so, so I really appreciate their time and I'm happy that they could join us here and share their perspective with us. Thank you.

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