

Podcasts and compulsory attendance found to improve student learning

January 10 2024, by Idun Haugan



Aksel Tjora has been experimenting with alternative ways of teaching sociology students. Credit: Bendik Knapstad

Lectures continue to dominate university teaching, but especially when it comes to big introductory courses, more group work and alternative assignments, such as making podcasts, can have a positive effect.

Consider a group of new sociology students who are about to dive into a completely new subject. Half of them are fresh out of upper secondary

school.

They need to settle into [student](#) life and get to know other students. They are about to embark on studies in a new field and must learn new ways of acquiring knowledge, regardless of their discipline.

They also need to come to grips with concepts such as legitimation, linguistic objectification, internalization, and externalization. What on Earth do these terms mean, and how will the students become familiar with them?

Textbooks and lecturers explain these new ideas, and the students will work on them in study groups. But the question still remains: how can students become familiar with new academic concepts and terms and understand how to use them correctly?

NTNU sociology professor Aksel Tjora has both tested and studied new ways of teaching and learning.

"In lectures with 200 students or more, not many of them dare to ask questions, provide input, or participate in discussions. We have now tested a number of different teaching methods in order to motivate the students," Tjora says.

Building on American research on podcasts in teaching

Recent American research shows an increasing use of film, art, and music in teaching sociology. Podcasts are also used in teaching sociology, but there is still limited knowledge of how educators use this tool.

In 2020, one researcher searched the American journal *Teaching Sociology* and found exactly zero articles or commentaries published since 2010 on podcasts.

Since then, other researchers have investigated the potential of using podcasts to teach sociology. Among other things, they found that podcasts seem to increase student engagement.

"We have explored this further, including by seeing what function podcasts can have in interaction-based learning," Tjora said.

Lectures are still the dominant form of teaching

Over the last 30–40 years, universities have paid more and more attention to how students learn best.

"We can see this as part of a specific development of the universities towards the education of the masses and the production of study credits and as a kind of industrial and mercantile approach in much of the sector," Tjora said.

University learning is largely associated with reading, listening, speaking, and writing. Speaking and writing require the most active involvement on the part of students and tend to fare relatively poorly in relation to measurements of what students spend their time doing.

The preference for passive strategies contrasts with learning as an active process.

"There are many indications that universities and university colleges have a way to go when it comes to facilitating student learning. Lectures are still the dominant form of teaching," says Tjora.

Active teaching methods can help integrate students into academic communities, increase motivation and involvement, and facilitate independent and critical thinking confidence.

"There has been relatively little attention has been paid to how sociological theory should be taught, and there has been little research on teaching the subject," says Tjora.

He and his sociology colleagues have taken a closer look at this by testing new ways of teaching and evaluating these approaches in conjunction with the students.

Many more students passed the exam

They have investigated how students can be taught a sociological mindset through interaction-based learning, with emphasis on the function of podcasts.

Tjora studied this with Inga Marie Hansen Høøen and Rebekka Ravn Lysvik, both of whom have been student assistants for the introductory course in sociology. This introductory course was used as a case study.

The introductory course was restructured in the autumn of 2018, and steps were taken to facilitate the students' active, creative, and collective learning through the use of group work and compulsory attendance in small seminar groups, interactivity in lectures, and academic and social gatherings.

The exam was changed to a portfolio comprising compulsory group-based submissions such as podcasts and blogs. This required significant follow-up from Tjora and his teaching assistants but increased successful completion (meaning passing the exam) by as much as 36 percent compared with the previous year.

Before the restructuring took place, the course comprised traditional lectures, voluntary seminars in large groups, individual semester assignments, and a 5-hour written exam. A report from 2016 highlighted low levels of interactivity in lectures.

'Dared to raise my hand for the first time'

The empirical basis of the study that Tjora and his two colleagues conducted in 2021 includes the evaluation of the introductory course in sociology (a survey), reference group meetings and a sample of podcast submissions. In all, 166 out of a total of 224 students registered for exams responded to the survey.

The analysis addressed three main topics: (1) a physical student community, (2) group collaboration and (3) podcasts as means of academically thinking aloud.

Physical student community: Despite the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic in the autumn of 2021, NTNU conducted physical lectures and compulsory seminars for introductory courses throughout most of the autumn. The goal was to get students back on campus.

The evaluation shows that the students experienced increased confidence through getting to know their fellow students at compulsory seminars. Each seminar group consisted of 10–20 students, in contrast to the lectures involving up to 220 students, which some found to be socially challenging.

In the evaluation, many students mentioned that they dared to ask questions and participate in academic discussions when they felt comfortable in the social setting. One of the participants writes:

"I have been a student for one year, but the introductory course in

sociology was the first time I dared to raise my hand and answer a question out loud."

Learning by thinking aloud together

Podcasts were tested as a tool for academically thinking aloud.

"Academically thinking aloud is the starting point for introducing podcasts as a compulsory exercise. The intention is to force students to talk about the subject and get them to relax. Everyone in the group has to participate in the conversation because it becomes very obvious if individuals do not speak or participate," says Tjora.

Groups of 3–4 students were tasked with producing a [podcast](#) in which they discussed social institutions using sociological terms. For example, a social institution might be a family, a job, a festival, or a leisure activity.

The students had to use relevant terminology and link it to everyday situations. Some chose Halloween as the topic; others chose residence halls, dating, or social media.

Putting on sociology glasses

"We found out how students use sociological terms in their day-to-day lives. They put on 'sociology glasses'. Listening to the podcasts, it is very clear that they were experimenting with using sociology terms, a little unsophisticatedly and spontaneously, but they did respond to each other's input and comments," Tjora said.

The answers were more refined in written group work, he said

The students said that they "learn a lot of sociology just by having conversations with other fellow students" and that "working together in groups means that you have to practice arguing for your academic point of view."

"In our observation of the students' work and in their own feedback, it became clear that learning through more spontaneous thinking aloud is key," says Tjora.

From skepticism to learning

The fact that the teaching contained a good deal of compulsory group work was not immediately met with great enthusiasm.

"In the beginning, we experienced a general skepticism towards group work. This was a little surprising because it is something they have been used to doing at upper secondary school," says Tjora.

However, in the evaluations after the students had completed the semester, it appeared that the [group work](#) provided good learning outcomes.

The students felt that they gained "insight into how others understand specific tasks", that there was a "low threshold for asking questions" and "someone to talk to regarding assignments and the syllabus".

According to the students' evaluation, experiencing that they can explain something to others using their own words gave them a sense of achievement:

"Having other people explain their perspectives and opinions creates a more nuanced picture where I feel I gain broader insight. It has also helped explain difficult theories to others using just a few

understandable words. I also learn from myself when I am forced to understand in order to explain things to others."

It has been important for educators that students become accustomed to talking academically among themselves as a learning process and free themselves from the need to only talk to lecturers when they perceive something in their studies as academically challenging.

Fewer free riders on podcasts

Group work also has problematic aspects, especially regarding written group assignments.

This is related to asymmetrical effort, where students find that they "learned the most and remember most of what I myself have written or said," partly because each group tends to distribute tasks among the individual members rather than working on them together. This meant that the students felt they learned more from working on an entire assignment alone or that group members who are given the most challenging subtasks learn the most.

Several students reported in the evaluation that they felt they did most of the work and had to carry the load because of little initiative within the group. This was said to be particularly challenging when it came to producing a piece of written work together.

However, thinking aloud together when producing podcasts and complying with academic requirements was an exercise in which everyone had to contribute. As a result, there were fewer free riders and more involvement, spontaneity—and learning.

"We found that many students developed the ability to academically think aloud, where they could understand their own everyday

experiences and surroundings sociologically. From an empirical perspective, the podcasts in particular show this most clearly," Tjora said.

The work is [published](#) in the journal *Norsk sosiologisk tidsskrift* (in Norwegian).

More information: Rebekka Ravn Lysvik et al, Innsiktsfull responsivitet, *Norsk sosiologisk tidsskrift* (2023). [DOI: 10.18261/nost.7.6.3](#)

Provided by Norwegian University of Science and Technology

Citation: Podcasts and compulsory attendance found to improve student learning (2024, January 10) retrieved 3 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-01-podcasts-compulsory-student.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.