

Exploratory Podcast: When you have something to teach, but even more to learn

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UNICON POSITIONING STATEMENT

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UNICON is a diverse organization, with representation from over 100 schools. In addition to size and geography, schools are diversified by the expertise, reputation and strength of their faculty, the types and size of their customers, and increasingly the breadth and depth of their executive education portfolios. The ability to represent many perspectives in executive education is a great strength of UNICON and a source of continued learning and vitality in the field. This diversity of views and interests also means that there is no single “UNICON perspective” on its commissioned research topics, including no single perspective on the future of business education – an area which this report ably addresses. The interpretations and perspectives expressed in this report are those of the researchers, professionals who are deeply familiar with the business education field and the needs and objectives of its stakeholders.

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UNICON Discussion Paper: Exploratory Podcast- When you have something to teach, but even more to learn

The UNICON Research Committee is pleased to offer this paper by Jim Pulcrano and Patrick Reinmoeller for discussion. It differs from most UNICON research, which involves collection of quantitative and qualitative data, by providing a personal and first-hand example of pedagogical innovation and insights from two faculty members with deep experience in executive education. Indirectly, the paper also sheds light on a notable digitally-driven innovation of the past decade (podcasts) and how they may find greater utility in learning.

The past two years have been a time of rethinking and reworking learning and exploration, for executives, professionals, and executive education professionals. The UNICON Research Committee invites you to share and reflect on Jim’s and Patrick’s learnings in the spirit of innovative and impactful learning.

You know these podcasts, when the expert is given a platform to perform a formidable lecture from the pulpit or book dump. Recording a lecture, or paraphrasing from a textbook, such podcasts are reusing extant material. Their purpose is exposition, dissemination and then storage by the listener. We could call this kind of podcast expositional, but as it exploits mostly written content, permit us to call it exploitative. These podcasts are often very valuable. If you need to know something about a new virus variant, exploitative podcasts help you to get up to speed on the topic while driving. You are downloading canned content to fill some blanks in your knowledge or understanding. We find this confirmed by data. In 2021 one of the most important reasons why people do not listen to podcasts in the US and EU is “podcasts do not provide me anything I cannot already find elsewhere”¹. It seems that a large number of people want podcasts that offer them what they cannot find elsewhere.

When Gerard of Cremona² was entering Toledo sometime in the 12th century, he vaguely knew what he was searching for. He knew what he wanted to learn, and after some research discovered that Toledo was where he would find it. He wanted to learn more about astronomy, and he hoped to find a legendary book. There he found and eventually translated *The Almagest*³, written by Ptolemy in the 2nd century. Seeking to understand the ancient book, Gerard consulted Toledan scholars, colleagues, and those with intimate knowledge of Arabic. The journey and the translation were an exploration of the unknown taking him 1000 years into the past and up into the stars. But he knew where to start and the questions to ask. For the topic we were tackling in our podcast, we did not know where our *Almagest* would be found.

Most of the time most of us appreciate just being able to download information to fill gaps in our knowledge. What do we do when our question is ill-defined, when we don’t know where the required knowledge might be, or we’re not sure what questions to ask to find the answers we’re seeking? These are situations that call for exploration, and in this article we’ll write explicitly about exploratory podcasts, an endeavor to create new insights into a complex problem and at the same time document the journey itself. Gerard of Cremona knew where to start his journey; often we don’t.

The majority of podcasts available exist to tell us something, to help us better understand a topic, to answer a question that we have. Favorites of ours are The Knowledge Project, The New York Times Daily, Sway, HBR IdeaCast and WorkLife with Adam Grant.

Why did we create something different that we’ve come to call an “exploratory podcast”? When Patrick first proposed the idea of writing a case on the airline industry during the Covid-19 pandemic with Climate Change looming, Jim was intrigued partly because he felt he knew little to nothing about that industry. Writing a case would force him to learn about it. Leaping into the task we interviewed explorer and entrepreneur André Borschberg, who had circumnavigated the globe in 2016 in a solar-powered plane. The 45 minutes of that interview exposed even more deeply how little we knew, and, even more so, that we weren’t even sure what questions to ask.

¹ Statista (2021) Reasons behind no podcast consumption in the US and Europe (www.statista.ch/statistics/1271874/reasons-for-no-podcast-consumption/). Researchers are concerned about the regressive ways podcasts are designed (Fernandez, Sallan, & Simo, 2015; Hew & Cheung 2013; Abdous, Facer, & Yen 2012).

² Moller, Violet; *The Map of Knowledge*, Anchor Books, 2019

³ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Almagest>

That, and the complexity of the industry in the midst of a crisis, called for a different format. Writing a typical b-school case was going to be a one-time two-dimensional affair. Yes, the final case would provide learning for readers, as in illustrating a framework or model, but the learning that happened along the way to publication would be reserved for the writers. We needed a vehicle that pushed and exposed us. A blog could've done this in a written format, but a podcast series seemed the more daring and authentic, as a range of voices would be heard espousing the ideas we'd uncovered and exposing what we didn't know. We chose right from the beginning to invite a series of industry experts and stakeholders to join us, as we believed this would provide the necessary diverse perspectives, real-world evidence, and credibility. What we didn't realize was how much this would increase our workload.

For the many who did not listen to our series, "Should I fly?"⁴, it had 7 episodes, each episode focused on a different theme and was 25 to 40 minutes long. In addition to extensive desktop research, twenty-two people were interviewed, from the former CEO of British Airways to pilots, stewards, air traffic control experts, IMD professors, and the CEO of Geneva airport, generating hundreds of pages of transcripts. In addition, through available audio material, another ten voices, such as Captain Sully of "Miracle on the Hudson" fame, were integrated into the podcasts. Interviews were done via Zoom, with the interviewees also recording their voices on their phones' voice recorders. Our voices were recorded in IMD's state of the art studio. After many cuts, the final script for the 7 episodes was still 70 pages long. IMD provided a podcast expert, both to guide us as we wrote and rewrote each script and to cut and paste the audio to make us sound professional.

Our preparatory research, interviews, and the writing and recording of the first two episodes lasted from November 2020 to July 2021, with the first episode aired in late August. From there on it was a regular rhythm of one episode every two weeks, forcing us to quickly outline each episode, go back to the data and interviews we'd gathered, put together the script for the next episode, at times talk again with the experts to test our understanding, get additional footage, look at the questions we were getting from listeners, produce a final script, and then get back into the recording studio.

The exploratory nature of the series, a knowing choice by us, meant that we really could not jump into future episodes without first hearing how listeners responded to what we'd aired. At times it was also about us hearing ourselves and realizing that in our studio conversations we'd uncovered another unanswered question. Documenting our search, we made ourselves publicly vulnerable.

Deciding to spread out the series over time helped manage resources but was also suggested by this lingering pandemic that went from no vaccines and "this will be over soon", to boosters and "this will stay with us", as we continued to explore the themes. It also meant that the topic was with us 24/7, and inevitably came up in conversations, and those conversations provided additional questions and insights. Creating and distributing the podcast became a serendipity engine – by putting it out there it created the opportunity for serendipity to occur⁵ – that someone would trip across our podcast, and then write to us with an observation, piece of data, or question. Or it would cause us to look twice at an article that previously we would've ignored. When one is unsure

⁴ Our podcastplug <https://iby.imd.org/podcasts/the-question-should-i-fly/>

⁵ [Why serendipity is so much more than just a lucky break - I by IMD](#)

of where to find the answers you're seeking, a serendipity engine can be a powerful tool, and a podcast series can be that engine.

This was certainly not the easy way to create a podcast, but it suited our selfish reasons for doing it – we wanted to learn. Making sense of what had happened since November 2020, we started to reflect on our experience as we approached the final episode. Trying to understand better and articulate what we learned, we did what we had done all the way through: we reached out to learn from others.

Podcasts are a relatively new medium. Since the case study method was introduced at Harvard 100 years ago, looking into less conventional teaching materials seemed only appropriate. While referring to or even showing (short excerpts of) mostly popular movies⁶, live case studies and role-plays⁷ have become increasingly accepted as part of the materials at business schools, podcasts seem still mostly unheard of.

According to Jo Ellison of the Financial Times, today there are over 2 million podcasts, up from 500,000 just three years ago. A 2019 global survey by Reuters revealed that about 35% of the 2000 participants have listened to a podcast in the month prior to the survey. While in the UK 21% did, in South Korea even 53% did so. In the US 50% of all households are podcast fans, according to Podcasthosting.com. The industry in 2021 has \$1 billion turnover. According to Statista, the leading podcast publishers with millions of unique streams or downloads in October 2020 like iHeartRadio (266 million), NPR (219), NYT (155), PRX (87), ESPN/ABC (74.), and Wondery (58) are very influential. However, the music streaming platform Spotify is expected to become the dominant platform shortly (depending on how well it handles it's Joe Rogan issues)⁸.

When you step back and look at the big world of podcasting, there are apparently four main genres⁹

Nonfiction narrative podcasts; Interview and/or conversational podcasts; Hybrid podcasts; Scripted fiction podcasts. Among the top 10 most popular podcast categories for the 18–49-year-old audience feature science podcasts.¹⁰ They straddle the categories of nonfiction, interviews and hybrid.

In any of these categories, nonfiction or fiction, many podcasts exploit material that is already out there; they offer existing content, more or less animated in audio. They reuse what listeners can find elsewhere. What our colleagues and our experience taught us is that the alternative approach of developing exploratory podcasts is promising. We would describe this alternative with a few keywords. It generates original content. It is a conversational search. It is not structured as the traditional “listeners learn what they are told”. The podcast is a shared exploration of the boundaries of knowledge for all involved. Feedback loops between listeners and the presenters of the evolving findings create a community of explorers.

⁶ Bartunek (2013) emphasizes the value of great movies to teach research findings, Erez and Grant (2013) advise to use “soft stuff” (e.g. cases) and also provide “hard” evidence”, O’Doherty (2020) seeks to stimulate creativity and learning by close analysis of ethnographic films.

⁷ Culpin and Scott (2012); Hoe and Gruehlich-Smith (2021)

⁸ <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/feb/05/spotify-attempt-to-use-the-facebook-playbook-over-joe-rogan-wont-wash>

⁹ <https://www.voices.com/blog/4-different-types-podcasts/>

¹⁰ Nielsen (2021) Podcasting today, September 2021

When we checked in the library what is known about podcasts, we found much for education and learning in other professions such as the medicine or sports. Research¹¹ does not seem to focus on podcasts in teaching about management, not to mention the executive classroom experience that we know of at IMD. This strikes us as surprising because our experience of learning by listening and probing reminded us of interactions in the executive classroom and ... much research.

Naturally, we asked several veteran podcasters that we liked why they did what they do.

Amy Carroll, a communications coach, wrote: “A few years ago I started doing short podcasts of 10 or 15 minutes where I would interview people, mostly past or current clients about what techniques they were applying from the coaching, what results they were getting, funny or touching success stories and often completed it with a request for a tip from listeners”.

When asked why he did podcast, Mike Wade, an IMD professor and inspiration for us¹², said:

- Personal challenge: As a consumer of podcasts, I enjoy the format and considered it a challenge to create my own. I wanted to find out what it took to create a high-quality educational podcast.
- Personal learning: I wanted to learn from my colleagues – each episode includes at least one interview with an IMD colleague. I focused on many topics that were new to me.
- IMD capabilities: I regard podcasts as learning tools, complementary to what we provide at IMD in class or online. In the future, I expect that podcasts will become an integral part of the learning portfolio we provide to our clients. I believe that we (IMD) should be experimenting with this format, and I was willing to take a first step.

Dr. Laura Penn, a communications consultant, sent a voice message (naturally) saying “I started doing podcasting last year at the beginning of COVID. I wanted to use it as a way to reach out to my constituents, to my tribe, to support them through the chaos that ensued with them having to go online and everything else that you and I both know happened. So that was the biggest motivation, to be an anchor for people who I cared about.

Pascal Finette, of Singularity University fame: “for me producing the podcast is just another fun way to get my thoughts and ideas out to people. And people seem to like to hear my thoughts in my voice. Really no other reason — oh, and it has become too easy and fast to produce and distribute a podcast that there is no big hurdle to overcome... :)”

We could well relate to all these expressions of the podcasters that their oeuvres involve a lot of work, and do not yet amount to a full-time job but complement other activities like consulting, coaching or facilitation. The podcasts are experimental, playful, and they probe what might be. We always proceeded with the idea of not being sure what the content of the next episode would be because it depended on what we learned from the existing episodes. Looking back at our small sample, it may be biased to the artisanal and niche, in a commercial market that is growing fast.

¹¹ The reviews focus on different topics such as video podcasts (Kay, 2010), entertainment in education (Goldman, 2018), Hudson (2020) focuses on the analysis of a conversational podcast, Wake et al. (2020) on pandemic podcasting and Johnston et al. (2021) on the effectiveness in sport management education. Tracey (2013) lists podcasts as part of the digital materials to teach social entrepreneurship.

¹² <https://iby.imd.org/podcasts/management-under-the-microscope/>

In many ways what we did with this exploratory podcast was like other means of integrating research and learning in executive education. Dr. Peter Lorange, IMD's former president, often said that our most potent research tool was bringing our ideas into an executive classroom and seeing how participants responded to them. Prof. Bill Torbert of Boston College writes about "action-inquiry". IMD's Prof. Preston Bottger often talked about the power of "Reflection and New Perspectives": Decision -> Action -> Results but coupled with Reflection -> New Questions -> New Perspectives. Andy Van de Ven, a former president of the Academy of Management, highlights the importance of "engaged scholarship". Senge's organizational learning, Weick's sensemaking, Nonaka and Takeuchi's knowledge creation and IDEO's design thinking, the family resemblance struck us. Also, MIT's Prof. Donald Schön's view of reflective practitioners, echoes what we experienced. In our dialogues with practitioners, the nature of our work, and perhaps our naiveté, also caused most of them to reflect and provide inputs that were probably new. Likewise, the comments put to us by listeners changed what we recorded in subsequent episodes. This seems close to going through Argyris and Schön's double loop together with the community of explorers.

So what?

Besides this power of integrating learning and research in executive education, perhaps podcasts amplify the serendipity engine better than what can happen in a classroom or workshop setting. "One thing a person cannot do, no matter how rigorous his analysis or heroic his imagination," the Nobel laureate Thomas Schelling once observed, "is to draw up a list of things that would never occur to him."¹³

If we here suggest podcasts as an inspiring approach to explore and capture surprising insights, we need to ask for who could this be of use. Clearly for faculty teaching executives, exploratory podcasts offer a new way of combining teaching and research that creates a record of the discovery that can span a few days or weeks during short courses. There is, though, a bigger opportunity that lies in continued exploration that transcends a single cohort and weaves together alumni across time and space.

Podcasts are content and content is king. For those focusing on business development in executive education, podcasts are a welcome addition to the range of material that can serve as tasters, and by using examples of exploratory podcasts, they can show how the research and learning can be customized to a particular client or industry. Easily listened to, an episode of a podcast can create the appetite for more because the journeys of exploration are adventurous. For business development, exploratory podcasts are an innovative complement to the traditional teaching methodologies. For custom program proposals, rather than listing case studies to be read, including easy to listen to podcasts that are engaging is clearly added value.

The greatest opportunity in executive education that we see for exploratory podcasts is to be seized by the executive program participants themselves. As assignments, project work, executives can explore important issues in diverse teams and discuss the podcast's journey of discovery of

¹³ [Seven Types of Serendipity - by Steven Johnson \(substack.com\)](#)

which they join – vicariously. When executives as participants in programs engage with podcasts they learn about themes, companies and also about the other participants on the team. Beyond the role of engaged listeners, executives who are invited to (co)create their own podcasts as deliverables are making their own discoveries, for example, in their own organization or in an adjacent silo. Within companies, this allows starting generative conversations that help discover solutions that address issues as well as opportunities. Creating such content can then be easily shared with other colleagues who are not (yet) participating in the program.

Executives who prefer learning over getting answers will enjoy generating podcasts on company issues and discovering ways forward. Executives who are developing such discoveries create content, but more importantly, they are honing their discovery skills. Open to change themselves, show vulnerability and not knowing, comfortable with not having all the answers, they are actively shaping who they are and how they relate to others and their company, and perhaps even creating serendipity engines in their companies. As the late Clayton Christensen and his co-authors outlined in *Innovators DNA*, discovery skills distinguish innovators. Exploratory podcasts help to hone such skills effectively. Working on exploratory podcasts requires *asking* questions, over and over again. Only who is willing to be vulnerable and to admit that they don't know the answer can find new ideas that break preconceived frames. Discovering new directions, creating new links between what had been unrelated through *associating* and making new connections is a powerful way to learn and expand one's horizon. Carefully *observing* and attending to the details revealed in dialogues and interviews, executives gain insights in new ways of doing things. Following up on ideas and *experimenting* lies at the heart of exploratory podcasts. The process of developing their podcasts provides executives the unrivaled opportunity to *network* with a wide range of people across different units within but also outside. Searching for new understanding shapes people's discovery skills as if they were to go to a gym, doing an exploratory podcast builds the skills and resilience to innovate.

Gerard of Cremona knew what and who he was searching for when he arrived at the gates of Toledo. When we are in a position of not knowing where to get the knowledge we're seeking, despite the depth of our analysis or the wildness of our imagination, perhaps an exploratory podcast is the way to find it.