

# Podcasts and Inclusive Narratives. New Spaces to Foster Citizenship Through Words

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## Abstract

This article outlines a research-action project that uses podcasts as an educational tool within the field of diversity and inclusion, titled “Narrazioni di genere e altre identità. Costruire comunità inclusive” (“Gender Narratives and Other Identities: Building Inclusive Communities”). The podcast was chosen for its versatility and unique narrative characteristics, engaging students and teachers in reflecting on identity and diversity through individual and collective memories. The approach integrates the pedagogy of memory and storytelling as tools for critical literacy, emphasizing marginalized stories while fostering media literacy. The article introduces “Chiamami così” (“Call me this way”), a podcast series featuring stories of diversity and belonging within marginalized communities. The project explores various dimensions of diversity, creating a platform for dialogue and reflection. Through testimonials, interviews, and reportage, “Chiamami così” leverages the potential of podcasts to provide rich, innovative perspectives on inclusion and community, aiming to establish a shared and inclusive language.

**Keywords** *podcast; literacy; diversity & inclusion; individual and collective memories; counter-narratives*

## 1. Introduction

This article presents a podcast series developed as part of a research-action project on diversity and inclusion titled “Narrazioni di genere e altre identità. Costruire comunità inclusive” (“Gender Narratives and Other Identities: Building Inclusive Communities”). The podcast serves as an educational tool for students and teachers, leveraging its narrative-driven potential to literacy through storytelling. As a medium, the podcast proves particularly suitable for disseminating educational and formative content. It offers a means to recover silenced narratives and facilitates critical and reflective thinking through storytelling. This approach expands the concept of literacy beyond reading and writing, incorporating the ability to reflect and critically engage through a new medium.

## 2. Building spaces for storytelling as opportunities for literacy and recognition

Narrating the past in an educational context means choosing to engage with both individual and collective memories. The earliest pedagogical reflections in this area are attributed to Duccio Demetrio and the insight presented in his volume dedicated to *Pedagogia della Memoria* (1999), in which he defined memory as a tool for care, positioned between biographies and autobiographies. In the field of historical-educational studies, memory has only recently become a subject of focused research, owing

to pioneering investigations conducted in the early 2000s in Spain and Latin America. This trajectory culminated in the fundamental work *School Memories: New Trends in the History of Education* (Meda et al., 2007), which also laid a solid foundation for the Italian scholarly tradition. Historian Yuval Noah Harari has identified human narrative capacity—initially oral, then written, and eventually expressed through new media—as one of the fundamental traits that characterize the *Homo sapiens* (2017). This capacity has enabled human beings to engage in abstract thought and form connections through shared values, ideals, and ideas that solidify into collective narratives. These narratives allow societies and groups to recognize themselves and collaborate effectively. In this context, reading and writing emerge as tools of social cohesion, capable of building and preserving collective roots. These social factors significantly motivate expressive abilities, allowing the creation of narratives that endure over time through the written and oral forms (Brook & Patti, 2014).

The process of remembering in a social setting, as defined by Maurice Halbwachs (Halbwachs, 2024), is characterized by a historical trajectory that culminates in the definition of social frameworks of collective memory. These frameworks consist of memories that a group selects and decides to center in its narratives. It is within this narrative process that the use of collective memories becomes a literacy tool. Narrating becomes an opportunity to organize a structured discourse aimed at communicating elements of oneself or one's community to an external audience. This process becomes a critical focus for literacy, as it is inherently tied to relational abilities and forms the foundation for participation in community life (Meschini, 2018).

The ability and opportunity to narrate finds in podcasts a novel means of experimentation aimed at literacy associated with critical thinking. This is particularly true during production phases that are not merely technical steps but rather integral parts of composing a narrative text ultimately entrusted to the human voice. In this sense, podcasts are presented here as a viable tool for those seeking to bring the topic of media literacy into educational contexts, with a particular emphasis on marginalization. Literacy challenges often affect individuals from marginalized groups who, due to limited social interaction, find their interest in constructing and using language delegitimized by the lack of external recognition they receive. From this perspective, engaging with individual and collective memories can serve as an opportunity to reclaim the centrality and importance of silenced narratives, thereby providing motivation to re-engage with literacy (Grasso, 2020). Podcasts, with their distinctive characteristics and narrative potential, are proposed here as an educational and formative tool. They serve to recognize marginalized stories on the one hand and initiate a process of media literacy on the other.

### **3. The characteristics of podcasts as a communication tool**

Born, at least in their contemporary conception, in the first decade of the 21st century, podcasts—in audio-only format or as audio-visual formats (also referred to at times as “vodcasts”)—have, in recent years,<sup>1</sup> solidified their central role<sup>2</sup> among the various communication channels available in the entertainment world. Consequently, they have also become prominent in the realms of information, education, and academic dissemination, the latter being a field in which podcasts are now a significant subject of study. This prominence has arisen due to certain distinctive characteristics that set podcasts apart

from other media. These features pertain both to their modes of production and consumption, as well as to their fundamental attributes as a communication tool.

First and foremost, in terms of their audience, podcasts are distinguished by their remarkable versatility of consumption. Far more than other mass media, podcasts offer extensive freedom to listeners, providing the opportunity to be consumed by an audience “that wants to listen to what they want, when they want, where they want, and how they want” (Jham et al., 2008). Podcast listeners can choose when to listen without adhering to programming schedules or being subject to the “constraints” inherent in live broadcasting. Furthermore, seriality is an additional feature that facilitates user engagement. Podcasts are rarely produced as one-off episodes; instead, they are often released over extended periods, typically on at least a weekly basis. This consistent cadence allows the collection of episodes—distributed via RSS feeds, supported by dedicated hosting services, and accessed today, albeit with some drawbacks, through digital streaming platforms (Sullivan, 2019; Bonini & Treré, 2024)—to build listener loyalty. Users need only subscribe to the feed, generally free of charge, to effortlessly return to the content.

For those who produce podcasts, significant advantages are evident primarily in terms of production agility: without necessarily striving for excellent production quality, the technical skills required to record and post-produce an episode are quite easily attainable, and basic equipment (microphones, recording supports, editing, and post-production software) can be purchased without significant financial outlays, or, in the case of software, obtained in open-source versions<sup>3</sup>. Podcasts also benefit from a fairly straightforward and cost-free distribution process: the main podcasting platforms—Spotify, Apple Podcasts, and Audible, above all—impose no particular entry barriers, neither in terms of service fees nor content filtering, while uploading on YouTube, now a leading platform for video podcasts, is likewise free. Naturally, being present on major platforms involves some challenges in terms of visibility, as it is influenced by algorithmic logics often based on rating and ranking criteria that are not explicitly disclosed, making content discovery difficult (Wade Morris, 2021). Nevertheless, these challenges can be overcome through integrated use of social media, which are increasingly employed as “bridge” platforms for promoting cultural products by leveraging cross-media interactions (Adler Berg, 2023).

The strength of podcasts lies, perhaps most significantly, in their expressive characteristics. The experience of listening to a live monologue or dialogue fosters a sense of intimacy for the listener, creating what Swiatek (2018) describes as “the impression of directness and closeness, that makes it such a compelling way to bridge spatial and temporal divides.” This quality enables podcasts to “help individuals cross contextual boundaries and knowledge boundaries,” enhancing the perception of authentic, unmediated communication. Such authenticity generates a sense of trust in the listener and promotes the creation of a sense of community among groups of listeners (Jorgensen, 2021; Euritt, 2022).

To conclude the overview of the distinctive characteristics of podcasts compared to other media, we present here a concise yet comprehensive list that appears to be exhaustive. This list, proposed by Spinelli and Dann in a book dedicated to the subject, is organized into 11 points:

1. Consumption on earbuds encourages an interior and intimate mode of listening. [...]
2. Podcasting is primarily a mobile medium. Podcasts move with the human body and are consumed in urban spaces [...].
3. Podcasts offer more listener control. It is extremely easy to replay a podcast and listen to it repeatedly. [...]
4. Podcast listening requires more selection and active engagement on the part of the consumer in choosing listening options. [...]
5. Podcasts can thrive on niche global audiences. They are less rooted in material communities, regions, and countries (an advantage and a disadvantage).
6. Podcasts are interwoven into social media and as such have a heightened capacity to enhance engagement with, and activate, an audience. [...]
7. Podcasts can be produced and distributed without the approval of a commissioning editor, program controller, or gatekeeper. This means that creators are often working with great freedom and little support.
8. Podcasts are usually distributed as part of a freemium model [...].
9. Podcasts are “evergreen,” available (theoretically) in perpetuity [...].
10. [...] Mistakes can be corrected, apologies added, advertisements rotated, and sound remixed.
11. Podcast do not have the timing and scheduling constraints of broadcast media [...]. (Spinelli & Dann, 2019)

#### 4. Podcasts in education

The distinctive elements typical of podcasts, which have quickly made them highly popular communication tools, also render them equally effective channels for the dissemination of knowledge, and this is true in the educational field as well, where the effects of their use have been widely studied and discussed. Versatility and low production costs have enabled their rapid integration into educational practices, initially in a more experimental manner and now with a range of consolidated uses that, when compared to traditional classroom lectures, can be summarized as “substitutional use, supplementary use, and creative use” (McGarr, 2009). The substitutional use has long been debated because some scholars, during the early stages of the phenomenon, had proposed the hypothesis that it could discourage classroom attendance and the associated benefits. However, recent studies agree in emphasizing that this risk seems to have been averted (Williams et al., 2016). This is because, given the availability of audio content, students still seem to prefer the use that McGarr specifically defined as “supplementary,” meaning as a complement to teaching, through which they can reinforce or deepen the skills they have acquired (Bryans Bongey et al., 2006; Lonn & Teasley, 2009). Finally, creative use, which refers to the co-production of podcasts created together with students (Lazzari, 2009), serves as an active learning tool that helps to increase engagement in educational activities (Hall & Jones, 2023), stimulating the search for alternative approaches to storytelling or the focus on concepts.

Podcasts, as recently noted by Moore (2024) in a comprehensive review on the topic, can thus demonstrate remarkable utility in educational contexts precisely due to the same characteristics that have made them so popular in recent years as a source for entertainment and information. Their “conversational” nature allows for the presentation of complex concepts and ideas in more accessible terms,

while their ability to encourage active listening to perspectives different from those typically encountered fosters the development of opportunities for dialogue and increases student engagement with topics that are less familiar to them:

Podcasts may also be useful tools for stimulating critical thinking and analysis, particularly when confronting issues which may be unfamiliar or uncomfortable for students, and which may challenge normative expectations and understandings. (Moore, 2024)

## 5. Podcasts as an inclusive medium

The same characteristics that have made podcasts an important resource in the current educational landscape have also turned them into a medium with a significant impact in terms of inclusivity and the construction of alternative narratives to those that dominate mainstream discourse. The low barrier to entry, both in terms of production and consumption, despite the aforementioned challenges of emerging from their niche due to the listening dynamics now controlled by major distribution platforms (Sullivan, 2019), allows marginalized communities to have a voice, enabling them to engage in self-narration free from external interference. Moreover, the narrative formats typical of podcasts, such as the monologic storytelling or the two-voice interview, assist in producing an unmediated account of direct life experiences and highlight perspectives that are unconventional in comparison to mainstream views.

Numerous examples of podcasts have facilitated experiences of “counter-narratives” that challenge gender, racial, social stereotypes, or those related to the theme of disability. Some of these have also been the subject of scholarly study. For instance, three podcasts about stories from the Latinx community produced by the U.S. National Public Radio, which provide an authentic and non-hetero-directed perspective on “*latinidad*” through a storytelling mode typical of this culture (the “*crónica*,” a narrative subgenre common in Latin America that here contributes to representing decentralized subjectivities and constitutes “an intervention to the universalist [...] assumptions of the narrative paradigm”) and an “hemispheric” approach to the theme (Reyes García & Martínez, 2021). Another example is the Swedish podcast “*Flyktpodden*,” literally “the escape podcast,” dedicated to ethnic minorities in Sweden and promoting intergenerational dialogue among migrants of different ages, aiming to overcome majority narratives through the sharing of common stories and the construction of an alternative narrative that goes beyond stereotypical representations (Gustafsson, 2023). Finally, two Italian-language productions—“*S/Confini*” and “*Black Coffee*”<sup>4</sup>—which, drawing from the post-colonial imagery tied to Italy, have worked to shed light on issues related to diasporas and migrations to and from Italy, offering a broader and alternative view of Italian identity compared to the mainstream representation (Finozzi, 2023).

These examples, to which others could be added, fully represent the versatility and potential of podcasts as a tool useful for the construction of shared memories of experiences of marginalization, facilitated by the sense of intimacy that characterizes this medium and which contributes to the strengthening of the sense of community, positioning itself as a space where it is possible to give prominence to minorities.

Podcasts offer a new space at the margins [...] for voicing the self and community, and for constructing subaltern counterpublics [...] in ways that seek to both highlight and challenge recurrent processes of

racially-formed modes of disenfranchisement. [...] This counterpublic space is private enough to grant podcasters a safe venue to express their identities in their preferred manner and to build trust [...]. Podcasts serve as a public sphere for anti-racist consciousness and create a framework for progressive political activity. (Vrikki & Malik, 2019)

The possibility of free reconceptualization offered by these spaces, combined with the ease of dissemination, makes them, as we have stated, a highly educational tool, useful for increasing awareness and collective sensitivity regarding these issues. Moore, in this regard, drawing on observations by Harris (2019), highlights the potential of podcasts in the educational field, particularly when utilized to enhance student engagement and the development of critical thinking on socio-political topics.

## 6. “Chiamami così”: a podcast for storytelling and literacy

When, as part of the project “Narrazioni di genere e altre identità. Costruire comunità inclusive,”<sup>5</sup> we had to choose a communication strategy for the educational kits intended for students and teachers, which were to be produced as outputs from our research activities, we decided to create a series of podcasts, entrusting their production directly to those who could use them as a tool for self-narration of their life stories and the communities to which they belong.

The series, titled “Chiamami così” (“Call me this way”), borrowing the title from a book by Vera Gheno (2022) is dedicated to the storytelling of personal experiences through the voices of the protagonists themselves. It addresses the many aspects of diversity that emerge from individual and collective memory narratives or from reports of inclusive experiences, and aims to place particular emphasis on the lexicon of diversity, with the intention of collectively building forms and ways of a broad and inclusive language. In this way, the focus on literacy also encompassed the ability to develop and spread an inclusive language, through the direct involvement of those who are frequently subjected to linguistic stereotypes.

To date, six episodes have been produced—soon to be available on the project’s website, which is currently in its beta version, and on distribution platforms—and at least two more are in production. Additionally, one final introductory episode, created by the project coordinators, will be added.

1. Episode 1 is titled “Lo Sport che accoglie” (“The Sport That Welcomes”). It tells the story of “Terzo Tempo,” an integrated rugby project that has been active for over ten years at Valdisieve Rugby – Polisportiva Sieci, located in the province of Florence. The narrative gives voice to various key figures—the project manager, one of the coaches, and one of the athletes involved. The story highlights the broad potential of sports clubs as spaces for local training, community building, relationship development, and inclusivity, whose impact extends beyond young people to their families and the connected communities. The episode concludes with a historical overview provided by the episode’s author, starting with a reflection on the accessibility of sports for individuals with disabilities in Italy, before expanding to focus on the discrimination they faced throughout the twentieth century, ultimately leading to a description of the current situation, which has certainly improved but remains insufficient.

2. Episode 2 is titled “Convivere con la diversità. Fabrizio Acanfora racconta l'autismo” (“Living Together in Diversity. Fabrizio Acanfora Talks About Autism”), and it features a long and interesting interview with Fabrizio Acanfora, an Italian writer and activist known for his focus on issues related to neurodivergent individuals. The interview addresses the topic of neurodiversity both from a theoretical perspective, discussing the current framework in light of contemporary sensitivities, and through the narration of Fabrizio Acanfora’s lived experiences. His approach to the topic contrasts with the now widespread notion of inclusivity, instead advocating for the concept of “coexistence among differences,” which avoids implying the superiority of the category that includes over the one that is included.
3. Episode 3 is a theatrical performance by Egon Botteghi, who has adapted his monologue “Parti di madre trans\*” (“Parts of a Trans\* Mother”) for “Narrazioni di genere”: a performance/seminar that is simultaneously a testimony of the author’s life, an autobiographical performance centered around the narrative—alternating between ironic and dramatic tones—of his experience as a trans mother of two children, which includes a careful reflection on the prejudices still widely prevalent around this topic.
4. Episode 4 is yet another interview with Irvin Mujčić, the creator of the “Srebrenica – City of Hope” project, and is titled “Ekometeta village: percorsi di Memoria attiva nel cuore del bosco di Srebrenica” (“Ekometeta village: paths of active memory in the heart of the Srebrenica forest”). The interview, recorded in the Ekometeta forest, narrates Mujčić’s story and his attempt to establish paths of active memory in the place he was forced to leave in 1992 and to which he was only able to return in 2003.
5. Episode 5—titled “La lingua tra identità e riconoscimento” (“Language between identity and recognition”)—focuses on the theme of “forbidden languages” and the difficulties faced by foreign speakers in a territory where their language is not spoken. The episode recounts the protagonist’s dual experience, first as a speaker of Kurdish in Turkey, a language that is indeed forbidden, and then, once she arrives in Italy, her relationship with learning the local language, comparing it with the difficulties encountered by her mother. The episode also reflects on the role that mastering the language of the host country still represents today as an often insurmountable barrier for migrants, one that risks undermining self-determination, the choice of qualified professions, and the process of integration. The focus of the narrative then shifts to the story of two Albanian women currently living in Donoratico, who retrace the stages of their integration process, interpreted through their relationship with the Italian language. Finally, an interview with Elvira Mujčić, a Bosnian writer and translator, explores the reflection on the relationship with the mother tongue in the country of migration.
6. Episode 6 recounts through interviews with three members of Sinti and Roma communities the experiences of marginalization endured directly or by their families. It is titled “Sinti e Rom a scuola” (“Sinti and Roma at School”) because the focus of the narrative is on school memories, with special attention to the history of the differential classes for Roma and Sinti within Italian state schools.

Episodes in the making:

7. The first of the episodes in the making is an in-depth exploration of gender stereotypes and the implications of motherhood in the workplace, based on archival materials from the Ipazia Voluntary Association of Prato.
8. The latest episode set to be produced will focus on the story of a daughter's experience in a homogenous family, exploring current misconceptions around these family realities.

Each episode of the podcast was created by individuals, specifically students, who have lived the experiences narrated. In reconstructing the narrative, they organized the relational and literacy space that enabled them to offer a critical and enriching perspective on realities often associated with marginalization. In this process, the words from a broad and inclusive vocabulary played a central role in both the production and post-production work.

## **7. Methodology and Impact Analysis**

Each episode was entrusted to one or more people involved in the project, who were given complete freedom in choosing the topic to be addressed and the manner of narration. The production team's role was limited to providing a brief that could serve as a starting point for defining the outline and gathering materials and testimonies, but full control over content and communication choices was left to the contributors. As a result, the episodes explored various expressive modes allowed by the podcast medium, from a single voice to dialogues, interviews, reports, and theatrical monologues.

The creation process was entrusted—specifically regarding the selection of content—entirely to the discretion of those working on individual episodes. This included selecting the theme and deciding on any individuals to involve, while maintaining a collegial approach to ensure consistency and the exchange of ideas and insights. During the process, a production model was developed with the aim of creating a replicable standard that could be implemented in schools targeted by the podcast project. Specifically, contributors were asked to prepare a script—varying in detail according to specific needs—paying particular attention not only to the narrative itself but also to the methodologies employed in collecting both direct and indirect testimonies.

Once the basic script was finalized, recordings were carried out over one or more sessions for each episode. As before, the work was coordinated by the entire team but ultimately finalized by the individuals directly involved, who actively participated not only in recording but also in post-production.

Simultaneously, the in-person training program for teachers and students (comprising five sessions each) outlined in the project was initiated. This allowed for an assessment of the research-action objectives, namely the creation of open and non-directed spaces for dialogue on themes of diversity and inclusion through the use of educational tools (podcasts) oriented towards storytelling and self-narration. This evaluation was conducted based on an unconventional dissemination model for the podcasts, which was piloted during the training sessions.

During the sessions, after presenting the project and providing a brief theoretical introduction by the



coordinators, a space for dialogue was opened instead of delivering a unidirectional lecture. This approach started with the playback of excerpts from individual episodes, with the full content made available on the project website. This method fostered active listening, which went beyond passive reception, and served as a springboard for dialogue on the project's key themes based on the content heard. In some cases, the episodes were presented directly by their creators, offering students and teachers an additional layer of context surrounding the proposed concepts and generating new avenues for reflection.

The decision to present podcast excerpts directly in the classroom allowed for an immediate evaluation of their effectiveness. Through dialogue and interaction with the project's target audience, it was possible to conduct direct—albeit informal—observations of the podcasts' impact on the self-representation of minorities and the development of critical thinking regarding experiences of marginalization among underrepresented groups. Students, in particular, demonstrated an active engagement with these prompts, offering reflections and sharing their perspectives.

In the final phase of the project, which is still ongoing, an experimental co-design process for the podcasts was initiated with the participating student groups. This phase allows students to directly explore the possibilities of self-narration through podcasting and collaboratively assess the effectiveness of the proposed approach, not only in terms of its reception but also regarding its potential for replication.

## 8. Conclusions

The objective of the podcast series “Chiamami così” is therefore to leverage the effectiveness of the podcast medium to develop a context for the education of individual and collective memory storytelling, as well as experiences of marginalization, giving voice to the protagonists and attempting to build alternatives to dominant narratives, in order to promote literacy – understood here as the development of critical thinking around specific issues – both in those who produce these narratives and in those who consume them. This objective will also be pursued through the digital archive of materials used as inspiration for the episodes and a collection of biographies starting from the Auschwitz archives, titled “Le radici dell’odio” (“The Roots of Hate”), which will be made available on the website along with the podcast series. All of this will be carried out in synergy with the work done during the training sessions for teachers and students.

Thus, the choice of the podcast as the medium for delivering the project's content is not only driven by technological reasons but is primarily rooted in the attempt to create a space for pedagogical-cultural literacy, oriented towards the lexicon of new media and the broad language in which to realize—through the synergy among the various stakeholders involved: project members, interviewees, teachers, and students from the schools involved—tools for the construction of plural communities where diversity is conceived as variety rather than opposition.

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<sup>1</sup> Starting, at least, from 2014, the year of the launch of the Apple Podcast platform and the release of the podcast Serial, which marked the beginning of what some have called the “Golden Age” of podcasting, or, according to others, the “Second Age” (Bonini Baldini, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Limiting ourselves to the Italian scenario, to confirm their ever-increasing popularity just compare the data from the first Ipsos Digital Audio Survey (*Ipsos Digital Audio. Il punto zero sui podcast Ipsos*, 2019), in which 26% of the Italian population between 6 and 60 years old declared themselves podcast listeners, and those of the last one (*Sbloccare il potenziale del podcast*, 2024), in which the figure rose to 39% (same figure, in truth, as in 2023, which could be a first sign of reaching the plateau in the growth of a phenomenon that has in any case reached a now relevant size).

<sup>3</sup> For example, Audacity, one of the world’s most popular audio capture and editing software and entirely open source (<<https://www.audacityteam.org/>>, 11/2024).

<sup>4</sup> Of which only the second one is still in production.

<sup>5</sup> “‘Narrazioni di genere e altre identità. Costruire comunità inclusive’ is a project of the University of Florence aimed at developing an action-research initiative in the field of diversity and inclusion, centered on narrative and self-narrative (public or private) through oral testimonies, unpublished and published writings, and various other forms of storytelling. ‘Diversity’ here signifies non-oppositional variety, fostering closeness rather than distance, and encompassing different viewpoints, ideas, stories, and affiliations. This approach creates a shared space for dialogue, encounters, and critical debate. By collecting the diverse voices of ‘diversities,’ the project seeks to develop tangible training and educational tools, where collective storytelling lays the pedagogical and educational foundations for reimagining collective memories and plural societies” (<[www.narrazionidigenere.eu](http://www.narrazionidigenere.eu)>, 11/2024). The research team for “Narrazioni di genere e altre identità” is coordinated by Luca Bravi, Francesca Dello Preite, and Vera Gheno.