Slamming the Closet Door and Taking Control: Analysis of Personal Transformation and Social Change as LGBT Podcasting Blazes a Trail of Democratization of the Media

Kathleen P. King
Professor of Education
Fordham University
New York, New York

Keywords: Empowerment, voice, transformative learning, new media, LGBT, technology

Abstract: Mainstream media prohibits free publication and circulation of LGBT perspectives; this research analyzes and reveals the rapid development and metamorphosis of the LGBT podcasting community (2005-2008) from a queer theory framework. Included are current use and opportunities for new media as instructional tools of voice and equity in adult learning. Participants are encouraged to listen to podcasts produced by the researcher for an introduction to the topic. Post-conference dialogue will also be available.

Introduction
Since 2004 Internet-based new media formats have exploded the exposure of the online community to alternative voices, viewpoints and experiences. From political and personal blogs, to independent podcasts of all flavors and now popular YouTube® videos, the general public has finally adopted the original purpose of the Internet: for users to be content creators (King & Gura, 2007; Walch & Lafferty, 2006). It is through the recent advent of convenient and free Web 2.0 technologies, such as those new media examples of blogs, podcasts and vlogs that people of all ages, levels of technology expertise and varied backgrounds are claiming their place and “voice” on the vast expanse of the Web.

Podcasting is a new media technology which has particular interest to adults who desire to “be heard” and yet might not have or want access to mainstream media. Since 2005, anyone with access to a computer, Internet and an inexpensive microphone can record their content of choice, distribute, and syndicate it worldwide for free (King & Gura, 2007). With such a wide scale adoption of podcasting, it is significant for researchers and students of adult learning to understand why and how the LGBT community has identified and made use of this communication tool. Indeed, it has become a transformative learning experience for many of them as they explore different roles, sexual identities, and personas. This paper provides new aspects of the research study related to meaning for adult learning practice. (King & Sanquist, 2008 for more).

Purpose of the Study
The Need
The opportunity for this research is seen in a subtle, but significant contrast in equity. While podcasting has stormed mainstream culture through iTunes® in the last 3 years (2005-2008), few LGTBQ podcasts are available there. In contrast, independent podcast directories provide a wealth of podcast primary sources to learn from, document, showcase and analyze an awakening and celebration of oppressed voices through this dynamic new media. These podcasts reveal LGBT adults discovering their voices, morphing their public self, and building societal impact individually and collectively.

The podcasting movement has been widely associated with the slogan, “Democratization of the Media” (Geoghegan, 2008; Walch & Lafferty, 2006). Therefore, it is consistent to assert that finding one’s voice and claiming public space, free from political, social, economic (music and broadcasting), and religious constraints would be a common motivation among LGBT podcasters.
This study explores, documents and analyzes the experience of the first three critically formative years of this new media of podcasting when thousands of independent pioneers found their voice. In this research and analysis it is evident that LGBT podcasters did not just come out of the closet, they were intent on taking control and in fact slammed the closet door behind them with finality.

The Problem Statement
In the course of this study, I documented the development of the podcasting movement from a participant observer perspective and identify a clear pattern that the two largest segments in this first wave of podcasting as music, and gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) podcasts. Of particular interest to the adult learning field is, what can we learn from this experience and how can podcasting be used instructionally with LGBT adults. The research questions addressed in this paper enumerate this overall problem and are progressively revealed in the Findings section.

Theoretical Bases
In understanding the oppression of LGBT adults in dominant cultures and the role of new media, I used several literatures as our theoretical base. The transformative learning literature was the comprehensive framework for, in this case, LGBT adults continuing to learn about their persona, identity and new media communication (Cranton 2006; King, 2005, Mezirow, 2000). The premises and stages of this model include opportunities to understand adult’s “exploring new roles” and “trying them out.” Being able to build on prior transformative learning and sexual orientation development research and perspectives, (Brooks & Edwards, 1997; King & Biro, 2006) was critical to this study of technology enabled global communication and reaching into new possibilities for adult learning.

Not only did I use the broader literature on sexual orientation development (Lovaas, Elia, & Yep, 2006; Strong & Others, 2008), but also that grounded in the adult learning field (Badgett & Frank, 2007; Hill, 2006). Queer theory literature illustrates the political and social oppression, discrimination and conflict issues which emerged quickly in these data. Queer theory’s focus on the roots of these issues guided my greater understanding of the significance and possibilities of empowerment of the oppressed group. Observations and recommendations include global broadcasts to the general public, and the opportunity for empowerment via teaching and lifelong learning. This research also reveals the synthesis of lifelong learning and LGBT sexual identity development (King & Biro, 2006).

Research Method
This research provides a case study analysis of a social dynamic trend, empowerment of adults, and technology innovation and adoption which indicates changes rooted in adult learning theory and research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Merriam, 1997). Both qualitative and quantitative inquiries were used with the researcher serving as an expert participant observer (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The researcher has been podcasting since June 2005 and provides integral insight into the technology, context, and meaning of new media (King & Gura, 2007).

The current research used a mixed-methods approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Specifically, this was a qualitative–quantitative – qualitative sequential design which used five of the seven stages outlined by Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003): data reduction, data display, data transformation, data consolidation, data comparison and data integration. The data for the qualitative case study was drawn from three years of experience and field notes ending in March 2008; the analyses of the podcast directories were formally performed in early 2008.
Data gathering methods included primary document examination and evaluation via a research rating system established to document the source of information, frequency of listings, duration of the series over months and years, host and possible partnership/organizational relationships, and website reviews. The observations from the LGBT directories were identified as separate sources of podcasts from those in directories, because they likely had a smaller distribution (not to a general audience). I also selected LGBT podcasters with which to conduct follow up interviews based on their prominence, longevity and contribution to the field of podcasting and the emergent trends.

Specifically, these data were analyzed in what is described as Sequential Mixed Methods Analysis (SMMA) (Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie, 2003; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). Information regarding the content, profiles and history of 85 podcasts were examined from 6 different podcast directories (Podcast Pickle, Podcast Alley, iTunes, Podcast 411, Libsyn, and Rainbow Radio). In addition, 8 interviews were conducted over several months. These data were analyzed through tabulation, frequencies and constant comparison for emergent themes and field notes reduced to a narrative. Emergent themes were identified through coding method by constant comparison. This analysis was pursued until the data had been theoretically saturated (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998).

**Findings and Discussion**

The following themes and patterns emerged, upon examination for the research questions.

*What is Podcasting and New Media?*

Some historical and technical background will provide clarity of podcasting and new media and provide the basis for our discussion. This background is documented with selected citations, but widely drawn form the researcher’s participation in the development and use of the technology during this period of time. She is recognized as one of the leading educational podcasters and instructional technology authors on the topic that has first hand knowledge of this innovative era. (Barnes, 2007)

Podcasting is the distribution of digital recordings via RSS-feed directories. That is, individuals record audio content with computers or digital recorders, post it on the Internet on a publicly available server, create XML script RSS-feed to string it together and deliver the episodes. Then the producers or artists, called podcasters, visit the podcast directories on the Web to enter their information. Once it is reviewed for accuracy and appropriateness (based on the directory, this criteria varies), the podcast will be available in a searchable database for anyone to freely access. (See King, 2008.)

Potential listeners visit these directories, search for topics of interest and review the descriptions. Once selected, they hear the audio files on their own computer. These same audio files can also be ported over to a portable device such as a MP3 player, iPod, and some cell phones so that the listener can be mobile. Podcast listeners enjoy the advantages of time shifting content (convenient times to listen) and place shifting content (location to listen). Podcast listeners indicate they do so while commuting, working out and standing in lines (Li, 2007). Among multi-taskers, podcasts are a popular option to increase content choice and convenience (Walch & Lafferty, 2006).

The power of podcasting is that instead of audio files posted on a website or blog, they are distributed by “push technology” (developed by Winer (RSS 2.0) in 2003 ) (Geoghegan, 2008). Instead of listeners repeatedly visiting a website to check for their favorite podcast’s new episodes, they go to a central source: their podcatcher or podcast directory. When they open their free account, all the podcasts they have “subscribed” to are instantly updated. Technically, the database automatically refreshes, or “pushes,” each of the RSS-feeds and retrieves the recent episodes directly to their computer. Wide social adoption of podcasting has occurred since 2006 and made possible by software (i.e., iTunes or FireAnt) and web browsers (Internet Explorer 7.0 and Mozilla’s Firefox) which include RSS features.
What is Podcasts Relationship to LGBT Issues and People?
The first wave of podcasting was undoubtedly music: everyone who desired to could live their dream of being a disc jockey, instantly (Walch & Lafferty, 2006). However, the other major group of people who took to the “air waves” was LGBT. As a podcaster and participant in this new media revolution since 2005, I saw this dynamic phenomenon unfold. From a participant observer perspective the dominant voice in this media was a group usually grossly underrepresented in mainstream media.

During this period the non-mainstream identity for podcasting was a dominant theme of the media and the participants (2004-2007). People started podcasting because they wanted to be heard and might not have mainstream media support, did not want to cope with bureaucracy, and/or wanted to be free of FCC restrictions (King & Gura, 2007; Lafferty & Walch, 2006). Podcast listeners sought the free opinions and niche topics that would not support mainstream distribution, and/or enjoyed the edgy entertainment.

In fact, the Web is replete with tirades regarding mainstream media being able to censor or oppress the blogging and podcasting communities. In my experience, efforts as late as 2007 to include mainstream media in the circle with independent podcasters were met with great rebuff, consternation and doubt. (See the Podcamp, “unconference”, movement of grassroots, and dynamic conferences: www.podcamp.org)

What Does this Development Demonstrate About an Oppressed Community Gaining Voice?
Based on responses from podcasters and primary document evidence, I explored the benefits LGBT podcasters and community gained from new media. Their accounts repeatedly included references to development of identity, voice, empowerment, affirmation, challenge and confrontation. By summer 2005 all podcasters, LGBT podcasters included, were suddenly in a frantic race for who would reach the top of the podcast directory listings first. “Wannabe DJs” (disc jockeys) were the first to be validated as podcast “rock stars”. However, very quickly an increasing number of LGBT podcasts of the following genres streamed forth: self talk, talk shows, and glamour girl shows.

These data reveal that podcasting enabled LGBT and all podcasters to preserve anonymity if desired. LGBT podcasters either appropriate a stage name of an alternate persona or reveal their hidden self. To use an avatar identity, they would create a stage and show name, hosting and email account.

The traditional LGBT parallel should be evident. In many ways, this virtual and audio-mostly experience was a parallel of the familiar drag queen/drag king and female impersonator. In a technology masterful stroke, the increasingly accepted alternate identities had an entirely new and global platform.

Another parallel construction reveals that mainstream society had “wannabe DJs”, while the LGBT community had “wannabe drag queens.” The pseudonym/avatar enabled podcaster self-expression with a global audience. It also created a “safe” environment in which to explore, develop identity and voice: safe from identity discovery and physical harm, if they so chose.

Confidence and risk taking abounds in these early queer podcasts. The results within the individual LGBT podcaster’s work and across this genre were dramatic. Podcasters developed empowerment, confidence, voice, and focus. As a group many LGBT podcasts had matured from hesitant attempts to unbounded confidence, from self-talk to public education, and from self-indulgence to activism.

In addition to the powerful experience of podcasting for the LGBT participants, there were also obstacles and issues of persistence. In general, the LGBT podcasters broadcasted and publicized both positive and negative feedback about their shows, persona and opinions. The radical difference in these situations compared to non-virtual/online lives is that the LGBT people were in control and able to dispense responses from a position of authority rather than disempowerment. This position cannot be understated for groups of people who have been oppressed in mainstream society.
In addition, while LGBT podcasters’ experiences in this area were similar to those of other podcasters, different social and personal dynamics also emerged. The most common reason people stop podcasting is because they did not realize the time commitment involved when they started (King & Gura, 2007; Walch & Lafferty, 2006). Regarding obstacles, typically podcasters face time constraints, technology difficulties, waned interest due to fewer listeners, responses from listeners, or their failed dream to rise to fame. However, LGBT podcasters also dealt with confrontation from listeners, pressure from personal relationships and disjuncture in their lives. The last point is of particular interest as it connects with the theory of transformative learning in an informative way. In this case, podcasting may provide a means for LGBT adults to test their different personas, and find that they do not fit. Once they come to this conclusion they can easily withdraw from public view. Others withdrew because they found such a public demonstration of their identity was not as comfortable to them, however these were few.

How Are Podcasting and Other New Media Used in Adult Education Today?
The widest use of podcasting for adult learning is that of language learning (King & Gura, 2007). In fact, review of any of the podcast directories over the last 3 years, consistently shows the ESL, French podcasts, Spanish podcasts and other language podcasts dominating the education charts. And indeed, these numbers were being added to hourly with new episodes and new series. Based on conversations and interviews of podcasters, podcast listeners and adult educators this vibrant demonstration of adult learning may be due in part to the need to and difficulty in learning languages (King & Gura, 2006). In our global society adults need to be conversant with more languages, and they seek out technology to facilitate that learning.

In addition, by Prensky’s (2001) definition, current undergraduate students are Digital Natives; they are most comfortable with technology and seek to socialize, and solve every need with it. Young adults do not feel confined to traditional classes to fulfill their learning needs. In order to complete their homework and earn better grades, they seek new media resources. Undoubtedly, the Digital Natives’ early adoption of this technology contributes to the catapulting of language learning podcasts to the tops of the charts. But also, consider that language learning has been delivered by radio, audiocassette, and CD for many years; therefore, it was a quick leap to the MP3 and the more mobile format podcasting affords.

What are Experiences and Potential for Personal and Social Change Through Podcasting?
New media is used to meaningfully and effectively provide opportunities for LGBT adult learners to “test the waters” of their closeted or new personas, gain voice, and embrace control in the dominate culture. Integrating this media into adult learning classes from continuing to higher education courses, and beyond, we use valuable adult learning strategies such as active learning, immediate application, transferable workplace skills (technology) and relevant learning (Cranton, 2006; King, 2005).

Approaches to incorporating new media in empowering formats are limitless. New media instruction examples include, but are not limited to, design formats of small group dialogue, learner created media, class presentations designed as global resources and instructor created media; genres of: critical reflection, historical narrative, debate, first person narrative, storytelling, performances, and role playing; assignments as: in class, outside of class, individual, optional formats, group projects and continuing/long-term.

Through these learning activities, LGBT learners may not only experience freedom and validation, but also a platform to share their perspectives with their classmates/colleagues. Dialogue and peer learning are powerful tools for critical pedagogy and new media development by learners supports this as it shifts the classroom focus from teacher to learner. Just as web-based discussions have cultivated deeper reflection and greater dialogue beyond the physical classroom and hour, podcasting provides opportunities for adult learners to articulate their views and send them worldwide. Alternatively instructors can create private distribution.
Discussions of details and applications of podcasting with adult learners are available at http://www.teacherspodcast.org (see episodes 11-13 and 15).

Limitations of the Research

Limitations of this study include the participant observer role, although the researcher documented her frame work for study, her educational philosophy, queer theory perspective and prior conceptions of the topic. In addition, while the evaluation of the podcast directories was thorough, because of the scope of the research project and time constraints, a small sample of LGBT podcasters were briefly interviewed. A study that conducted extensive interviews with a larger sample could reveal much additional information. More extensive analysis of this podcast data will be submitted for publication soon.

Implications and Future Research

This research and paper have introduced the background, development and potential of podcasting among LGTBQ adults in critical pedagogical applications. Dialogue in this emergent field of instructional strategies to support LGBT adult learning is critical. The presentation itself demonstrates new media as an instructional method in several ways. Participants and readers are encouraged to listen to podcasts produced for more information regarding the use of podcasting in education (Adventures in Transformative Learning and The Teacher’s Podcast). To support continued dialogue regarding new media in adult learning and LGBT empowerment, the researcher will host a forum online (see www.transformationed.com for Conference Papers and a LGBTQ&A Preconference 2008 Paper link).

This preconference and AERC are the first publications on the topic of LGBT new media voices in adult learning; additional research needs to be conducted in order to understand and inform adult learning and related areas such as adult development, psychology, diversity training, HR and communications. Future research could focus on how adult listeners benefit from these experiences in their own sexual identity development, diversity awareness and communication. This research offers hope that opportunities of voice and empowerment may be experienced by oppressed and disenfranchised individuals so that they may enjoy freedom and take control of their life journey. Web 2.0 technologies and new media is providing such opportunities for more people, we can work to reveal still more.

References
