

PERSPECTIVES ON TEACHING

From the Sidelines to Center Stage: Opportunities to Discover Voice and Empowerment through Web 2.0 and New Media for LGBTQ Adult Learners

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Abstract

While many adult learners may feel hesitant to voice their opinions in a classroom, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) adults are especially aware that they are functioning in a critical, heteronormative society. However, in a climate of respect and safety they can gain confidence in sharing their true selves and opinions. An additional means of accomplishing this goal is through Web 2.0 technologies. This essay describes how LGBTQ communities have used podcasting to gain voice and empowerment on a mass scale and how lessons learned from this experience can be utilized in our adult learning classrooms. Web 2.0 new media is a vibrant opportunity to change classroom spectators to vital participants, content creators, and empowered adults.

Enabling adults to experience the greatest opportunities for growth and learning entails active learning and learner-centered environments. Yet even in these rich, interactive settings, many LGBTQ adults still hang back from full participation, authentic engagement, or disclosure of their sexual identity. This reticence and marginalization matters because our understanding of adult learners tells us learning must reach the needs, values, and beliefs of people in order for them to fully engage in reflection, critical thinking, and consideration of different world views (Cranton, 1994; Wlodkowski, 2003).

In a strange turn of events, technology, especially new media, provides powerful opportunities to cultivate authentic voices and create empowering experiences for under-represented groups (including LGBTQ adults). While technology has often been accused of destroying social interaction and creating greater distance among people, one only needs to look at the volume of activity at social networking sites to realize those assumptions are out of touch with current realities. More than twenty-six and a half million people per month visited Facebook.com in 2007 and spent over 3 hours per visit (Richards, 2007). This traffic represents 26.5 million users while MySpace.com has 105 million users. Such gregarious activity is a pro forma life for young and middle age adults in 2008 (King & Sanquist, 2008). And most savvy 15-35 year olds will tell you the way to cultivate relationships in the 21st century is via technology. These online social groups are powered by Web 2.0 technologies such as XML, Java, AJAX, scores of portable widgets, and more.

This trend is fueled by desires to not only engage in online chat, but also to create online representations. From websites to blogs, avatars to Miis™, young and older adults alike are creating virtual representations of their real, hypothetical, hopeful, or perceived selves for the world to witness. The purpose of these creations is sometimes to engage in online games or virtual environments (think Second Life™ or World of Warcraft™) and other times to discover or express their opinions, views, critiques, professional image, professional work, or inner selves.

With this rich social technological environment, adult educators have a tremendous opportunity to capture the interest of these adults and transform teaching and learning experiences. While technology's opportunities for revolutionizing education have been described in depth elsewhere (King, 2003; King & Gura, 2007), the ability to transform adult learning experiences through Web 2.0 technologies is profound. Podcasting, blogging, vlogging, and virtual communities provide the ability for under-represented groups to develop new scales of global citizenship, empowerment, and voice in formal and informal education.

Adult learners need to incorporate opportunities for critical thinking, analysis, voice, and presentation as they explore and apprehend their global participation. Furthermore, learners can create new media to cultivate lifelong learning information literacy, confidence, presentation skills, and research skills that are invaluable for success across the personal and professional lifespan. Yet, there has been little exposure in our adult learning literature to the potential for using new media in these ways.

Shame, Fear, Anger, Confrontation – Are Plentiful Here

If you are not sure of the degree to which homophobia and heterosexual privilege still exist around the globe, just sit down with LGBTQ colleagues or friends and ask them to share examples. From family to school, work to government agencies, one never knows when it is safe to reveal your sexual identity. Although it is illegal in most USA states and many countries to discriminate in matters of housing and employment based on sexual orientation, it does not mean that LGBTQ people have full-fledged rights or the assurance their “official rights” will be upheld (Hill, 2006; Lester, 2007; Mule, 2007).

Add to such displays of discrimination and bias the multitude of hidden privilege denied to LGBTQ people and the list becomes incalculable. While a heterosexual couple may be readily identified at a hotel getaway as having a second honeymoon, a gay couple might have to repeatedly explain the situation to dubious, curious, or hostile hotel staff. And while a lesbian couple might be recognized in Massachusetts or California (at least today, unless it gets overruled again), they still will not have federal social security benefits to protect each other. Having to explain and navigate reactions to their relationship to loan officers, school officials, doctors, and hospital receptionists is a way of life.

Understanding these daily struggles is essential to understanding the experiences of LGBTQ adult learners. Furthermore, this greater comprehension assists educators in appreciating how LGBTQ adult learners may benefit from moving from “the sidelines” of the rest of their lives, and be “center stage” in a learning environment of safety, respect, and empowerment.

LGBTQ Adults Grab the Global Mic

“No audition and say anything I want.”

“Take as much time as I want.”

“Absolutely FREE!”

“An instant global stage”

These descriptions of podcasting sound like the stereotypical drag queen’s dream, and they seem to lead the LGBTQ podcasting wave. A new media called audio blogging was born in late 2004 and quickly became known as podcasting (Walch & Lafferty, 2006). At the same time, a vast group of underrepresented people, yes LGBTQ adults, dominated podcasting in the first year (King, 2008b).

Podcasting includes making and distributing digital recordings via the Internet. They are usually designed as a series and have a theme or topic that ties together the episodes. Podcast episodes are distributed on the Internet and now cell phones via “push” technology of RSS (rapid simple syndication) enabling listeners to automatically receive new episodes.

The popularity of podcasting has skyrocketed since 2006. This phenomenon was largely accelerated by podcatching software such as iTunes and newer web browsers (Internet Explorer 7.0 and Mozilla’s Firefox). These browsers integrate RSS bookmark features so that separate software is unnecessary to find and listen to podcasts. From the modest 2004 start, podcasting has grown to 1.7 million podcasts linked to just one podcasting site in 2008 (Feedburner, 2008). This surge in numbers was driven by the sale of over 100 million iPods in its first year of production (Kiptronic, 2007).

The podcasting movement was frequently accompanied by the tagline “Democratization of the Media” in the beginning because it is available to all people to participate and empowering (Walch & Lafferty, 2006). These adjectives describe common traits with adult learning; therefore, considering how the LGBTQ community changed their use of this medium from 2004 to 2008 helps us understand their needs and the possibilities for application in other communities.

King and Sanquist (2008) researched this pattern and reveal that,

GLBT podcasting evolve[d] across three vectors of a matrix. These vector continuums are:

- Individual Podcasters – Organizational Productions,
- Solo Distribution (website) – First Wave Podcast Directories (Podcast Pickle, Podcast Alley) - GLBT Directories and Networks (Qpodder) - Mainstream Directories (iTunes, MS Zune network) – GLBT Entertainment Networks for General Audiences (The Gay Man’s Therapist)
- Shock Effect – Consciousness Raising of All People – Activism for GLBT People

All of these stages move towards voice and empowerment. (p. 5)

The development of new media by an underrepresented group reveals a push into the limelight by those overcoming societal and media silence and claiming their public voices. They designed their own pathway, individually, collectively, and decidedly innovatively. Stages of transformative learning (King 2005; Mezirow, 1990) are seen from disorienting dilemmas to testing and new perspectives experienced in the new LGBTQ podcasters (King 2008b). An evident pattern is that the podcasts moved from individual efforts, to consolidated directories, and social activism via LGBTQ and Allies groups. Originally used for self expression, the LGBTQ community also quickly identified how to use podcasts for communicating critical resources and information worldwide.

Opportunities for LGBTQ Adult Learners

To guide podcast use in educational settings, there are now a few significant resources (King & Gura, 2007) and many powerful primary sources to learn from. The ESLPOD podcast is produced at University of Southern California and has been at the top of the podcast listening charts for several years. This podcast led the wave of the immensely popular language learning podcasts now spanning the French podcast, German podcast, Chinese podcast, Japanese podcast, to Grammar Girl, and everything in between and beyond our imagination. In addition, though many universities are distributing lectures via podcast and while this has use for second language learners or students who miss class, they are not an innovative use of the power of this technology.

Librivox.org is a global network of volunteers who record and distribute free audio books via podcast to everyone. In addition, adult learning settings can become part of this effort and make the recording of a chapter, poem, or book for a class project. This is a terrific demonstration of authentic learning that can incorporate literacy skills, presentation skills, collaboration, historical research, and literary critique, all while building global awareness and volunteerism.

In order to find an abundance of innovative educational podcasting developments, one needs to currently turn to K-12 education. King and Gura (2007) have developed a complete approach with taxonomy for considering educational podcasts, providing in-depth curricular examples across content areas and creating recommendations for sound, yet innovative podcasting in educational settings. Their emphasis includes not only using podcasts to reach content standards and objectives, but also to cultivate student collaborative and individual projects. Outcomes of these projects include critical thinking skills, collaborative learning skills, advanced 21st century learning skills, global awareness, cross-cultural communication skills, and project based learning.

Bringing the Potential to LGBTQ Adults

However, the application of instructional uses of podcasting with LGTBQ adults is yet a further dimension of these possibilities. By combining the lessons learned from independent LGBTQ podcasting with what we know about educational podcasting and new media, we realize that podcasting among LGBTQ adults provides abundant opportunities for life changing outcomes. Educational podcasting serves all learners, but here LGBTQ adults can be thought of

in at least three categories: teacher created podcasts, professional development podcasts, and student created podcasts.

Teacher Created Podcasts

Teacher created podcasts (King & Gura, 2007, 2009) enable educators to create materials to address the specific needs of adult learners, such as those who do not belong to dominant cultures or groups. Such materials emerge from the expertise of educators and enable them to use multiple modes of instruction to reach specific needs and learning styles of their learners and a similar larger, global audience. For example, a basic world history class could be powerfully supplemented with pre-college podcasts created by college instructors or designed by the classroom instructor to reflect recent research and interviews about historical perspectives of LGBTQ rights and issues across the globe.

Over time, another powerful feature of podcasts emerges in impact: Archives. Each podcast becomes part of a growing storehouse of learning resources that are searchable for students to access whenever they need to refresh their skills or gain more advanced learning. “Learning on demand” speaks to the culture and expectations of 21st century adults and provides all Internet users the ability to access specific and niche information more readily. For example, when visiting a podcast site that has episodes related to violence against the LGBTQ community, one could use “transgender” as a search term to return a list of all episodes related to this salient issue. Young students, young adults, and the general public are increasingly savvy with such strategies, and using a blog format as the backbone for the teacher created and instructional podcasts’ websites affords the powerful search capability without any additional effort.

Professional Development Podcasts

Professional development (PD) podcasts (King & Gura, 2007, 2009) provide ongoing professional learning for educators. They serve as effective platforms for teacher to teacher learning as well as consultant, association, or corporate delivery. Transformation Education LIVE! is an example of the professional development format that includes an educator and a consultant. In fact, Episode 18 of this series is an interview of the author on the topic of LGBTQ podcasting and meeting instructional needs of LGBTQ students (King, 2008a; King & Eissinger, 2008). PD podcasts can be accessed 24 hrs a day, 7 days a week and enable educators to reach out for support, direction, and resources in the context of their needs. As teachers create those materials, they address the specific, real needs of educators from their space of experience and reflection. Fully developed PD podcasts offer opportunities to access additional resources, show notes, create online communities, and gain feedback from colleagues. The basis for this new media is not a one way radio show transmission, but instead its premise is to cultivate community and in this case a community of practice. “PD on demand”, or professional development on demand, can also cultivate a global professional community.

Student Created Podcasts

The possibilities for incorporating student created podcasts into adult learning settings are limitless, including interviews, learner created training materials, role play, panel debates, talk

show formats, oral history projects, historical re-enactments, and learner performances to original productions. However, the opportunities to address specific needs of LGBTQ, enabling differentiated assignments, cultivating the expression of personal perspectives, facilitating peer and teacher validation of student work, and more, are even more impressive and powerful. In the next subsections, I discuss three stages of podcasting prevalent in educational settings: (a) planning and production, (b) facilitation, and (c) distribution and evaluation.

Planning and production. Podcasting enables learners to immediately work with a global audience. This reality makes their message valid and urgent; therefore, the motivation, ownership, and intensity of their related academic efforts increases. Research, scripting, negotiation with group members, editing, proofing, rewriting, producing, mastering, field testing, and more are many stages in podcast development that could be emphasized. These experiences may deftly integrate a rich storehouse of skills and targeted content learning in their assignments.

How often do our students email their homework to all their friends and family? How often do LGBTQ students feel that their real opinions, views, and new ideas are heard in the heteronormative and/or crowded classroom? Certainly, their views are not heard often enough, for either question. However, in a recent online article I discussed using new media in a teacher education course (King, 2008b). Several students took the challenge for the optional podcast format of an assignment. Once they posted their work, it urged other students to do likewise. Learners demonstrated by example that the exciting project was within their grasp; they heard the power of the experience in their classmates' voices, and they wanted to produce their own podcasting episodes.

This article is a particularly helpful example because it was *not* a technology related course and I did not instruct the students how to podcast. Only basic instructions were provided that listed materials, quick steps, and resource links. The approach is within the reach of most educators and the vibrant results are seen in not only individual learners, but also the class/community.

As with my early work in discussion boards (King, 2001), here, too I saw increased participation among marginalized or shy students who (a) created powerful public online content and (b) participated more in the classroom. One can easily realize the potential this experience holds for LGBTQ students who may be reluctant to speak up in traditional classrooms. Just as we know from transformative learning theory (King, 2005; Mezirow, 1990; Mezirow & Associates, 2000), adults need a testing ground, a proving space to test out new perspectives, views, and sometimes personas. Podcasting provides that experience for LGBTQ adults with no cost and total anonymity (King, 2008a; King & Sanquist 2008).

Facilitation. The literature on LGBTQ facilitation and cross cultural dialogue indicate that the strategies I used with my class to create an empowering, safe environment are important for LGBTQ learner support (Lester, 2007; Mule, 2007; Munoz & Thomas, 2006; Wlodkowski, 2003). I plan for and cultivate learner-centeredness, dialogue, discussion, and active participation. As is often the case with adult learners, the students in this class were not accustomed to this approach; therefore, I had to focus on building trust and facilitating respect of different and/or novice views and opinions. Again, these are key elements in creating a culturally

responsive classroom (Wlodkowski, 2003) and critical to creating an environment where learners can take risks.

Modeling is also a core element of my teaching style. Being in touch with my own learning style, adept at reading student responses and changing pace when needed, and having well-planned classes that include participatory activities on hand for each meeting were foundational characteristics. This approach enabled me to navigate each class session while I queried and made decisions about student needs, understanding, interest, and opportunity for teachable moments.

The approach I describe is common among many adult educators, yet it helps to reflect upon and articulate the elements included in their teaching. By engaging in reflective practice, adult educators become aware of their unexamined values, beliefs, and assumptions, what is missing from classroom interaction, and how to improve their instructional and planning decisions. As instructors we also need to be open to our transformative learning changes as we explore new ways to incorporate diverse student needs and dynamic instructional tools to produce new learning and life outcomes (King, 2005). There are profound ways that educators and learners alike may be transformed through this process of developing new strategies to serve LGBTQ adult learners.

When LGBTQ students speak out, straight students have to consider their response; thus dynamic dialogue and transformative learning opportunities are created (King, 2005). Moving from the “sidelines” to “center stage” is a prime opportunity for learners to explore and experience lessons of responsibility, consequence, law, ethics, research strategies, copyright issues, intellectual property plagiarism, and fact checking. While they might have been theoretical concepts, when students broadcast their voice, the situated learning heightens the topics’ critical nature. Vital teachable moments often emerge related to international policy, economics, globalization, free speech, political analysis, and government studies. Therefore, expertise in facilitation, breadth of experience, and content area expertise are catalysts in shaping instructional opportunities that will be dynamic and meaningful in the learning community. For instance, establishing ground rules to guide discussions and preserve safety of all class members is important when learners create content.

Distribution and evaluation. The final two stages of podcasting prevalent in educational settings are distribution and evaluation. Regarding evaluation, learners would create a simple blog as the home site for the class podcast series. Here they would upload audio files and RSS feed and show notes to the server.

These steps involve great opportunities for collaborative decision making, negotiation of interests, and sensitivity to the audience in marketing regarding both message and specific content. Rather than case studies and hypothetical situations, adult learners have a real life situation to work on their content related podcast projects.

The distribution process is also greatly impacted by what podcast directories the series is listed in. Podcast directories are websites dedicated to listing and hosting available podcasts by topic, genre, creator, theme, audience, and so forth. While iTunes™ is the most well known, in

practice it greatly restricts divergent or minority viewpoints. Why this is the case is likely due to its touted identity with “family” audiences that are translated to mean dominant and heteronormative groups and cultures. Indeed, iTunes™ is hosted and underwritten as a corporate venture by Apple™ and is not bound by equal access requirements. Inclusion in the directory and use of the service is based on subscriber’s agreeing to iTunes’s/Apple’s designated terms.

Participating in and discussing distribution of digital media will include deciding whether the podcast should also be listed in the 100+ other podcast directories. Such directories include PodcastPickle.com, PodcastAlley.com, Blubrry.com, Podomatic.com, and many more. (Usually a very current list can be found at Podcastingnews.com). Certainly however, it is mostly podcast creators and dedicated podcast aficionados who become aware of the more erudite directories. Recent data indicate that 85%-95% of podcast listener use iTunes™ (King & Gura, 2009) while the large majority aside from that use Google to find their podcast web sites directly (e.g., Podcastingnews.com, Feedburner.com). Not being included in iTunes™ can mean exclusion from the mainstream audience. Decisions about distribution becomes an authentic opportunity for students and teachers to dialogue, negotiate, and debate free speech, responsibility, bias, and voice and empowerment.

Evaluation of the learner created podcasts provides a profound situation for LGBTQ student learning and validation. When I introduced peer evaluation/comment projects in my class, the positive responses astounded me. These learners expounded upon and applauded the opportunity to see each other’s final work, comment, and support each other as respected co-learners. Introducing the peer-learning experience into podcasting projects can be a vital “proving ground” for all learners. However, LGBTQ learners, and other under-represented groups, will especially benefit from their classmates’ explicit support.

Conclusion

One can see that in using new media with LGBTQ adult learners the focus decidedly becomes mastery of learning through articulation, voice, and understanding because learners have to prepare to speak to the world on their topic and they realize the high stakes. In addition, the classroom has a real potential of becoming a responsive, empowering, generator for cultivating a learning community. Creating new media, whether it is podcasts, blogs, wikis, or nings, means learners will be on the front line of exposure, and they will want all the resources available to be sure their presentation is best. In such a community environment, LGBTQ/straight, native/immigrant, conservative/liberal become essential to help other learners hone their argument, phrase their statement, and state their cause. LGBTQ and straight alliances can take on new dimensions of urgency and interdependency in such project-based learning communities.

The study of early LGBTQ podcasts demonstrated this community as forerunners of adoption and innovation. In much the same way the need to tangibly and responsively address LGBTQ learners’ needs in our classrooms may spur on culturally responsive instructional design and new media transformations.

Resources

LGBTQ Podcasts and New Media:

- 1) Podcast directories where you will find a wide variety of educational AND LGBTQ podcasts; www.podcastpickle.com, www.podcastalley.com, www.zencast.com, www.blubrry.com, www.qpodder.org, www.Libsyn.com, www.mediafly.com
- 2) Colorado Queer Straight Alliance <http://www.coqueerstraightalliance.ning.com>
- 3) Free software and podcasting assistance– <http://teacherspodcast.org/podcasting-help/>

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