

Podcasting as Mobile Learning

Kathleen P. King

Fordham University, USA

INTRODUCTION

Debuting as “audio-blogging” in September 2004, podcasting has evolved to a much more stalwart technology and a greater societal adoption (Geoghegan & Klass, 2005). The public awareness of podcasting was marked by the integration of podcasting into Apple’s music downloading extravaganza called iTunes® in June 2005 (Lafferty & Walch, 2006). However it was in 2006–2007 that the steep incline of adoption became obvious (Li, 2007) as the iPod® became more popular.

Podcasts are digital audio files which are hosted on the Internet and published via a special scripting language. Podcasts are usually produced in a series, so that there are multiple episodes. And the scripting language, XML (Extensible Markup Language) and RSS (Really Simple Syndication), enables updates of the series to be sent to the listener’s computer or wireless device automatically (King & Gura, 2007).

However, readers may ask what connection does this popular broadcasting phenomenon have to distance and online learning? Or then again, how could MP3 players, iPods®, and the movement of new media have any impact or relationship to formal and informal learning?

In fact podcasting provides a powerful means to bring a long desired reality of distance learning — mobile learning — to a broad base of users. Podcasting may in fact be viewed as another vital development within the constellation of distance learning options. Indeed it is not until the last ten years that distance learning has become a powerful, even demanded, alternative among college students and workplace professionals (King & Griggs, 2006).

In the near future there will be few colleges and universities who will attempt to serve their students without some distance learning provisions (King & Griggs, 2006). And with workforces who must vigorously compete, collaborate and commute globally, the ability to upgrade their professional skills via distance training is no longer an option, but a necessity (Berge, 2000).

Podcasting offers a new dimension to the assortment of vital distance learning solutions because it provides the means to learn at a distance and learn on the move. In the past few years, several questions about podcasting have emerged, from who is listening to podcasts and how many, to how can audio be collaborative, and what are the future trends? These questions will be addressed as this brief chapter provides an overview of the major topics of podcasting and the critical issues related to it.

The impact that e-learning has had on education and the workplace over the last 20 years is paramount. From video-conferencing to online classes and desktop Webinars, technology has been integrated into educational and professional learning to create multiple and diverse distance learning solutions (King & Griggs, 2006). However audio and video podcasting as mobile learning stand to provide a very different dimension to distance learning (King & Gura, 2007). Instead of being restrained and constrained to a desktop or conference room, professional learning truly can be “anytime, anywhere.”

BACKGROUND

Podcasting has its roots in a movement originally identified as “Democratization of the Media” when it emerged on the technology scene in 2004. Dave Winer and Adam Curry discussed using the Web, XML and RSS formats to deliver audio and video in 2001 (Lafferty & Walch, 2006). Winer created the technology, but it was Curry who popularized the format in 2004 with the release of podcast listening software and his podcast *The Daily Source Code* (Lafferty & Walch, 2006). Adam Curry was known in the popular media as a former host on cable television’s MTV (Music Television) (Newitz, 2005). His popularity helped fuel the initial exposure of podcasting and perhaps set its early direction, as much of the early audio podcasting movement focused on music.

Actually, podcasting is more than a broadcasted “radio show.” It is web-based, served up by RSS feeds, and capable of being mobile. However, a critical point in the spread and adoption of podcasts has been that both the audience and budding podcasters identified with having their *own* radio show. They are authors, disc jockeys, and now in the familiar language of Web 2.0 technologies, they are “creators of content” (King & Gura, 2007; Li, 2007).

How Many Are Listening?

Estimates of the popularity and adoption of podcasting have varied. As Rob Walch of Podcast411, a highly reputable podcaster who has been in this field since early on describes it, “What was just a handful of ‘audio bloggers’ on Labor Day of 2004 turned into a group of a few hundred ‘podcasters’ by New Year’s Eve 2004.” (Lafferty & Walch, 2006, p.8). In July 2006, a study reported that 9 million plus people had downloaded a podcast listening program (podcatcher) (Nielsen, 2006), while numbers provided by eMarketer (2007) indicated this number to exceed 28 million in their June 2007 report. Specifically, this latter study estimated that 7 million Americans downloaded and listened to podcasts weekly (termed “regular podcast subscribers”), while 21.4 million additional adults listened to 4 or more per month (eMarketer, 2007).

Who is Listening to Podcasting?

Another way of looking at this technology is to use the lens that was revealed by a June 2007 report released by Forrester Research (Li, 2007). In this research, 9,031 US participants were classified as 13% creators, 19% critics, 15% collectors, 19% joiners, 33% spectators, and 52% inactives. Podcasters are in the 13% creators category and podcast listeners are in the 33% spectators category. An insightful slice of this data is that the older generations of technology users are among the inactives and that the more involved users are currently in their 20s -30s (as of 2008).

Today, a tour of some of the major podcast directories of content reveals the breadth of topics and broadcasting expertise. These directories include iTunes, Podcast Alley, Podcastpickle.com, and about 100 others. From politics to tech talk, dating to music, language learning to business management, one can find the full spectrum

of interests in all varieties of views, expertise, and sophistication.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

A Detailed Definition of Podcasting

Understanding the specifics of podcasting technology affords distance learning professionals greater understanding of how podcasts can be developed and used to deliver learning effectively and conveniently, while also preserving intellectual property rights. A podcast is a series of audio files which are stored and available on the Internet and published via an RSS feed. The feed enables each episode (or enclosure) of the series to be “pushed” to subscribers.

More specifically, a podcast is a series of music and/or spoken word MP3 (Moving Picture Experts Group layer 3) files, or MPEG-4 video (Moving Picture Experts Group 4 – Standard Video) files that are from the same source (organization, podcaster, or “broadcaster”) and linked together via a scripted language file which is posted on the Internet. These files are digitally recorded to be compatible with most current Internet browsers, MP3 and MPEG-4 video programs (such as iTunes, Windows Media Player, etc.) and MP3 players such as iPods, Sandisk, iRiver, Creative Zen, or other brands.

Podcast files may be shared and passed along to many people; therefore, in order to retain their identity they usually have descriptive text tags (ID3 tags or Identification version 3 tags) and graphics (image files) attached to them. Once prepared, the files are uploaded to an Internet server.

An RSS feed has to be created for a podcast and creates great portability and branding opportunities. It is similar to a specialized table of contents which begins with identifying information about the podcast and then gives details for each episode, or “item,” at a time. The RSS feed is the essential technology that puts the “push technology” power in the audio file series. Without this XML file, one would just have a Web-based audio file, accessible only by visiting that particular Web site and downloading or playing the file from there (King & Gura, 2007). However with the RSS feed, podcasters have audio files that people can sign up for (subscribe) and that are “delivered” to user’s “RSS feed readers” whenever there are updates.

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