

Initial Themes on Informal Learning and Podcasting

Elizabeth Elie

Department of Educational Technology, New Jersey City University

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Dr. Christopher Shamburg

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The purpose of this research is to examine how adults learn informally from listening to podcasts. Informal learning occurs outside structured educational settings, is largely self-directed, and is often invisible to the learner while it is happening (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Podcasting is a useful window into it because listening is voluntary, habitual, and woven into ordinary activity. Following the question, data, and methods of Shamburg et al. (2023), this study asks what adults learn from the podcasts they choose and what they do differently as a result. The data are four semi-structured interviews with listeners identified by pseudonym: Alex, 28, a software engineer; Maria, 42, a registered nurse; James, 67, a retired history teacher; and Priya, 34, a marketing manager. Transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020) reflexive thematic analysis.

Method and Coding Process

Analysis followed the six phases of Braun and Clarke (2006), informed by their later guidance on quality practice in reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Each transcript was read twice during familiarization, with impressions noted in the margins. Coding was done by hand through highlighting and note taking rather than with software, which kept the analyst close to the data. This inductive pass produced roughly thirty initial codes, among them recommended by a trusted person, listening while doing something else, habit stacked, host admits uncertainty, changed a daily habit, reframed a judgment, and verify a surprising claim.

Codes were then sorted into candidate themes by grouping those that shared an underlying idea. Listening while driving, listening while woodworking, and podcasts are attached to another activity, for example, clustered around routine. During review, two candidate

themes — one about how participants found shows, one about their skepticism — were collapsed into one, because both concerned whom these listeners decide to trust.

One methodological commitment shaped how the themes below were constructed. In reflexive thematic analysis a theme is not a summary of what most participants said; it is an analytic idea developed and defended by the researcher, and it need not appear across all participants or even a majority of them (Braun & Clarke, 2020). Prevalence is therefore reported below where it is informative, but it is not the warrant for any theme. Where a pattern is shared by all four participants that is noted as a feature of the data rather than as the reason the theme was retained, and where an important idea appears in only some accounts it has been kept and its significance argued. Given the small sample and the single coding pass, the three themes below are initial rather than settled.

Themes

Theme 1: Learning Layered Onto Everyday Activity

The organizing idea of this theme is that learning here is accretive rather than allocated: it attaches to activity the participant was going to undertake anyway. All four described listening as something that accompanies another task rather than something requiring dedicated time, listening while commuting, walking, cooking, exercising, and folding laundry. Alex called podcasts almost habit stacked, explaining that getting into the car automatically means putting an episode on, and noted that he rarely listens while simply sitting on the couch. James, who is retired, listens eight to ten hours a week while walking in the mornings and while building furniture in his garage. Maria said she does not usually sit down just to listen.

Portability makes this possible, but the interviews suggest more than convenience. Participants described moments when the listening stopped being background. Maria admitted

that a compelling episode leaves her sitting in the driveway for an extra ten minutes, to her family's puzzlement, and Priya described ending a walk on a park bench because she wanted to think about what she had heard before returning to her day. These moments mark where incidental listening becomes deliberate reflection: informal learning here is unscheduled, but it is not accidental.

Theme 2: From Episode to Action and Outlook

Participants consistently changed something because of what they heard, in two distinct ways. The first is concrete. Alex shifted his sleep schedule, began tracking workouts, and started keeping a notebook of ideas. Priya began meditating daily, starting with five minutes because that was all she thought she could manage, keeps a gratitude journal, and attended a mindfulness retreat. Maria started journaling and replaced lunchtime phone scrolling with short walks outdoors after hearing that ten minutes outside can lift mood. James and his wife added museums and historical sites to their travel.

The second kind of change is interpretive, and participants described it as more lasting. James said that instead of asking who is right, he now asks what he is missing, a habit he traced to podcasts showing how contingent historical events actually were. Priya carried away the phrase curiosity instead of judgment and now pauses to ask what she might not know when frustrated with someone. Maria learned that people often react not to events but to the story they tell themselves about those events, an idea she applies with patients and with her teenagers.

This interpretive dimension is the analytically important half of the theme, and it is worth noting that it is not evenly distributed: Alex's account is almost entirely behavioral, and the reframing pattern is carried by three of the four participants. It is retained not because it is common but because it distinguishes informal learning from information acquisition. A listener

who changes a habit has adopted a practice; a listener who changes how they judge a disagreement has revised a way of seeing, which is a different order of learning and the one most relevant to the research question.

Theme 3: Trusted Voices, Tested Claims

Participants explained both how they came to trust particular shows and how they limited that trust. Discovery was social before it was algorithmic. James was introduced to podcasts by his daughter, who told him they were essentially history lectures without the homework. Maria heard about one show from a colleague at lunch and another from a parent at her son's soccer game, and said that a recommendation from someone she trusts carries more weight than an algorithmic suggestion. Trust was reinforced by how hosts speak: three participants valued hosts who admit uncertainty or change their minds mid-conversation, contrasting them with the confident tone of social media.

That trust was bounded. Maria looks up any large claim afterward, especially about health, because sounding confident is not the same as being right; podcasts, she concluded, are a starting point rather than an ending point. James argued similarly that a good podcast creates curiosity rather than replacing it. Alex turned the skepticism on himself, observing that it is easy to mistake listening for doing. Participants also managed trust socially, avoiding politically charged conversations and reserving episodes about grief or anxiety for private listening. These accounts show adult learners exercising real critical judgment about an informal source, and they position the listener as someone making choices rather than receiving a feed.

Conclusion

These four interviews suggest that adult informal learning through podcasts is habitual rather than scheduled, generative of both behavior change and lasting shifts in perspective, and

filtered through a mix of social trust and personal skepticism. The pattern echoes the connection between listening, learning, and personal growth reported by Shamburg et al. (2023), while adding emphasis to the critical stance these listeners take.

Participants also described a broadened definition of learning: Priya said podcasts changed how she defines learning, Maria said they made learning feel normal again after nursing school, and James described them as replacing the intellectual life he feared losing in retirement. This last observation appears in only one interview, but it names something the other accounts imply, which is that what is being sustained through this listening is not a body of knowledge but an intellectual identity.

References

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