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Mobile 'comfort' zones: overcoming barriers to enable facilitated learning in the workplace

Keywords: Mobile learning; Comfort; Trainee Teacher; School

Abstract:

The affordances of mobile technologies are well documented (cf Sharples, Vavolua, Wali, Cook, Pachler). Linked with the rapid expansion of the 'SMART' phones, where users access fast/high quality information, new opportunities are offered to engage students at a time/place of their own choosing. Our small-scale study is located within the dominant discourse of mobile learning literature of context specific learning; it explores students' attitudes and use of their own mobile devices when out of classroom and engaged in their own professional practice in schools. Our findings indicate that students have complex/interwoven narratives that relate to issues of identity, personal/private space and their involvement in an emergent community of practice. We map these key themes into a framework for looking strategically at mobile learners in different personal/professional contexts, and identify of the design barriers to be overcome before the full potential of mobile learning can be successful with our own students when isolated on placement and juggling busy, complex lives.

Introduction

The affordances of mobile technologies are well documented (cf Sharples, Vavolua, Wali, Cook, Pachler). Linked with the rapid expansion of the 'SMART' phones, where users access fast/high quality information, new opportunities are offered to engage students at a time/place of their own choosing. Our small-scale study is located within the dominant discourse of mobile learning literature of context specific learning; it explores students' attitudes and use of their own mobile devices when out of classroom and engaged in their own professional practice in schools. Students, in a pre-placement survey, agreed/ strongly agreed with the statement '*I feel isolated from University when out on placement*'; revealed that they did not feel confident in their ability to engage with their study readings and felt pressurised by demands of their forthcoming placement.

Research project

Our project used SMS text messaging with the trainees working in schools to support critical engagement with peer review journals. We mapped key intervention points during the placement, and initiated 'chat via text' focused discussion using very short bursts of information over 24 hours. Trainees (in groups of 3) were required to access four carefully selected readings, and prompted, via tutor initiated SMS text messages, to complete tasks involving engaging with the literature in a critical manner.

Our findings (Escalate 2011) indicate that students have complex/interwoven narratives that relate to issues of identity, personal/private space and their involvement in an emergent community of practice. Some trainees expressed their feelings about the media that they were using and its appropriateness for the tasks it had been used for, and crucial to the responses was the participants' identity as a 'student'; 'trainee teacher'; 'user' of technology and their perception of their own 'technological identity'. Issues of personal/private space emerged, and this caused discomfort to some participants, however, this was their personal space inside *the classroom*. We can read into the responses the underlying stresses of being in school, on unfamiliar territory and in personally

challenging circumstances. The trainees, however, have got their mobile phones switched on (albeit in silent) in class to be able to see the message that has arrived. As one student commented:

“you’ve got a mobile phone in your pocket, so they’ve texted you ..they expect an immediate response”.

Three of the cohort received their messages outside the physical classroom environment, and made more strategic decisions as to how to respond, however, the arrival of the SMS still seemed to intrude upon their thoughts:

“whenever there were the txttools days, they would always be my busiest teaching day, so it would be a bit of a nightmare to get back in from the lesson and think oh I’ve got to respond to that, but I also need to prepare for the next lesson.”

The anxiety of assessed placement is clearly an issue, and whether in the classroom and reading the SMS straight away, or taking a more measured approach and confining the SMS activity to outside the classroom, it is still interesting to note that all the trainees still seem to display the behavior pattern of responding to an SMS text message, immediately/within a very limited time period. The trainees are all acknowledging the need to focus on academic work, and to ‘juggle’ their out of school (ie notionally private time) with their academic studies.

Communities of Practice

We feel that the focus of this group on particular academic tasks using SMS messages has led to an emerging community of practice for these trainees. The community created by these SMS tasks is private and exclusive. The participants all know each other. The responses are focused to a particular question, and are relevant to an assignment with a longer timescale.

“Just simply keeping in touch with your course mates as well which I feel was very good.”

Communities of practice are well known within education as teachers belong to overlapping communities within their school, department and subject specialism. However trainees from a range of different backgrounds are developing as both teachers and with their academic identity. As Wenger and Snyder say

“As Communities of Practice generate knowledge, they renew themselves. They give you both the golden egg and the goose that lays them.” (Wenger & Snyder: 143).

A model for profiling learners:

The themes emerging from the study offer a way of conceptualizing the learners in terms of their individual preferences/professional competences. The three main aspects with which to locate the learners can usefully offer a framework for mapping:

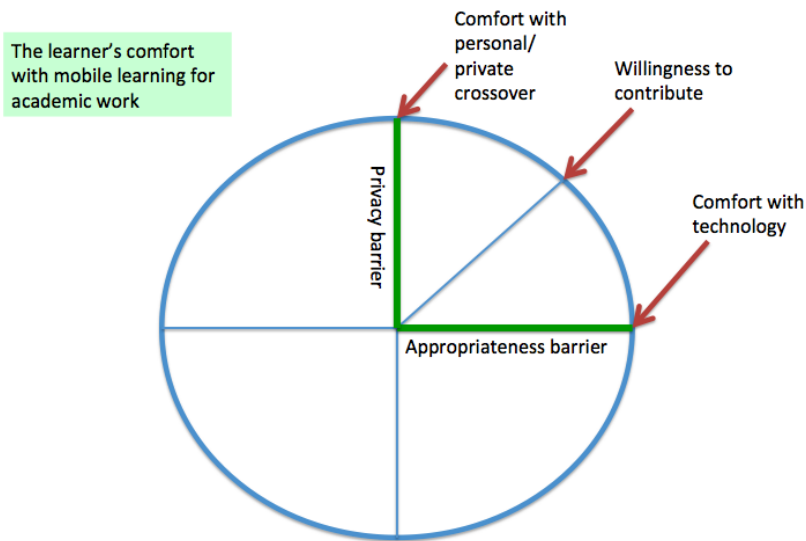


Figure 1: Conceptual model of attitudes to mobile learning

In the diagram below, students are mapped according to:

- (a) their individual reported personal/academic crossover 'comfort zone' which ranges from an acceptance and embracing of the 24 hour digital world through to SMS messages only in my 'usual' working hours of 9-5
- (b) Their willingness to be a contributor in an emergent group of practice from passively reading the SMS that others read to actively wanting to co-construct knowledge with their peers
- (c) Their attitudes to technologies, ranging from willingness to experiment/ try out a new idea to rejecting a new technology (to the individual) in favour of more comfortable/ familiar technologies such as facebook.

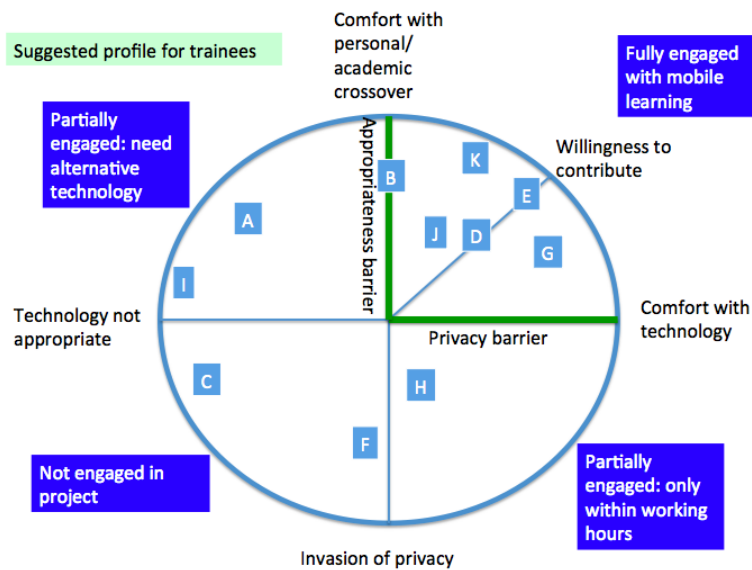


Figure 2: Populated model showing trainee barriers

Thus on the diagram we can contrast students K, E and B who are fully engaged with the mobile pilot and students A, I and C who only participated partially and at the periphery.

With such a small scale study, we are not making any claims as to whether this model can be scaled up and utilized across platforms, will replicate with other student groups, or indeed, can be said to be typical of student behaviour. What this work does offer is some initial insights into ways in which we may start to look more strategically at mobile learners in different personal/ professional contexts, and some of the design barriers to be overcome before the full potential of mobile learning can be successful with our own students when isolated on placement and juggling busy, complex lives.

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Escalate full analysis of questionnaire available electronically

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