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An international survey of mature students' uses of mobile devices in life and learning

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents research concerned with learner-driven innovative practice with mobile technologies and the interface between formal and informal learning. We build on our previous work investigating student use of personal devices for learning, work, social interaction and entertainment. A recent phase of the research included an international survey focusing on students registered on selected Masters and doctoral programmes in the UK, Sweden, Portugal, Hong Kong and Australia. The research gives an account of everyday uses and more unusual deployments of personal technologies by students from departments of education and technology. It illuminates learner choices and preferences, attitudes towards work–life boundaries, evolving social and cultural practices, and the impacts of technological change.

Author Keywords

informal learning, community learning, learner-driven inn ovation, work-life boundaries, questionnaire

SHORT PAPER

This paper takes forward research agendas concerned with learner-driven innovative practice with mobile technologies and the interface between formal and informal learning. We build on our previously reported work investigating student use of personal devices for learning, work, social interaction and entertainment. A recent phase of our research (2008–9) included an international survey focusing on students registered on selected Masters and doctoral programmes in the UK, Sweden, Portugal, Hong Kong and Australia. The research gives an account of everyday uses and more unusual deployments of personal technologies by students from departments of education and technology.

The International Survey was conducted by means of an extensive online questionnaire, adapted from the one used for our study in 2005. It has enabled the capture of qualitative and quantitative data on the use of various mobile devices in diverse spheres of activity; the workings of communities and groups; frequency of specific actions; activities that respondents wished to identify; and reflections on benefits and problems encountered. Qualitative data was analyzed by identifying recurrent themes and noting points of tension. Student participation in the research was voluntary and unconnected to study progress or assessment. A total of 270 students, mostly aged 25–44, have completed the questionnaire. The research illuminates learner choices and preferences, attitudes towards work–life boundaries, evolving social and cultural practices, and the impacts of technological change. It confirms the global popularity of SMS, listening to music, taking photos and setting reminders. It also highlights that web-browsing and reading e-news are fairly common and that article- and book-reading and note-taking, once considered implausible on handheld devices, are popular among a minority and may even encourage reading. Mobile devices are shown to support informal and community learning. Some community activities were deemed impossible without a mobile device.

The research provides good evidence of a contrast between claims that mobile learning can take place 'anytime, anywhere' and reported practice which often describes irregular usage dependent on a range of factors. From a global perspective, the research suggests that local economy, social mores, and learners' local knowledge, shape the frequencies and specifics of use. We are not attempting a direct comparison between different countries; however, we have found that by considering apparent differences we have been able to articulate questions about the impacts of social, cultural, and economic factors on learners' use of mobile technologies. Such awareness can make researchers and teachers more sensitive to different circumstances facing students who are studying remotely or spending time away from their usual place of study, and can help practitioners designing learning for culturally diverse cohorts. Adapting a previously trialed questionnaire meant that the quality of data collected was generally good, whilst follow-up interviews with students can complement and extend this data. The present investigation leads to various hypotheses for future research, including possible differences in communication choices depending on gender and age.