

Designing an Effective Mobile Learning Experience in a Marketing Research Course: Strategies and Applications

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Abstract

This article highlights the experience of using mobile devices to facilitate and enhance the learning experience of students. Students in a Marketing Research course used their mobile devices to complete a research assignment. Specifically, students used their cellphones, tablets, and laptops to create and deploy online surveys, to gather data, and to formalise results. The experience had a number of positive outcomes. In addition to capturing students' attention, the use of mobile devices facilitated active learning, sustainability, and student engagement.

Keywords: mobile learning, market research, iPadagogy, higher education, Gulf, applied research

Introduction

The world is in a state of constant change. Due to rapid technological growth in recent years, the demand for accessing information has become one of the main priorities in people's lives. The virtual world has become routine and creates a need to be constantly updated. This need impacts every aspect of our lives – from home to leisure, entertainment, and work. Consequently, education is also in transition because of the constant demands of the 21st century to adapt to the technological world (Haythornthwaite & Andrews, 2011).

Students are normally on the edge of this technological growth. Having access to the latest modern equipment, they live and breathe technology. It is common to see students using their gadgets in the classroom – particularly cellphones. Instructors often find themselves competing with cellphones and other devices for students' attention. A commonly heard refrain is "Please put that (cellphone) away."

Within academic circles, mobile devices are often viewed as a source of distraction and disorder. However, what might happen if students were asked to openly use their cellphones and tablets for learning purposes? This article focuses on the use of mobile devices as teaching and learning tools within the classroom. It relates the experience of how one business marketing course utilised mobile devices to actively deploy and conduct market research. An outline of the course and activities are presented along with student reactions and outcomes.

Literature Review

Recently, there has been a surge in the use of mobile technology within classrooms worldwide. Mobile learning, as defined by Wang, Wiesemes and Gibbons (2012), is "learning through mobile devices." According to Traxler (2011), mobile devices consist of smart phones, netbooks, handheld computers and other mobile technologies. Such devices provide an array of functions, including the ability to verbally communicate, store and retrieve data, send and receive SMS, provide documents and media, and gain access to the Internet. In short, these devices function as mini computers. Many smartphones offer the size of a standard mobile phone coupled with the processing power and capabilities of a small computer.

It is little wonder then that mobile technology has continued to evolve and grow in popularity. Since 2007, there has been a rapid increase in the purchase of smartphones, making these devices the fastest growing sales segment among mobile technology (Johnson, et al, 2009). A 2010 study from Ball State University, located in the United States, revealed that 98.8 percent of students owned cellphones (Bayless, et al, 2013). An informal survey of any college classroom would no doubt reveal ownership of smartphones by a large majority. Indeed, a random survey of classes at Abu Dhabi Women's Colleges (ADWC) revealed that over half the individuals in the class possess not one, but two smartphones. This is in addition to their laptops and tablets. Considering the sophisticated

functions of mobile devices and their wide availability among students, some educators encourage the use of smartphones and other mobile devices in the classroom to aid in learning.

Support for Mobile Learning Devices

A number of educators support the use of mobile devices as classroom teaching aids. These educators believe that when used artfully, mobile devices have rich potential to aid in learning. Several studies cite a number of positive outcomes and pedagogical benefits including student centred learning and student engagement (Baylore, et al, 2013; Cochrane & Bateman, 2010; Dermirbilek, 2010; Wang, Shen, Novak, & Pan, 2009).

Cochrane & Bateman (2010) highlight a key feature of mobile learning as the ability to turn any space into learning space. Tablets and similar technology are flexible in both applications and content. These features create more extroversion among students. Instructors can encourage learning beyond the walls of the classroom, an increasingly valuable principle as education has shifted from a normal transmission and transaction of content to a more transformative and blended learning approach when it comes to accessing information anytime, anywhere.

Furthermore, as stated by Dede (2005), learners need to be taught by using technology that they are familiar with. Generally, students will have spent a great deal of time learning the features of their mobile devices. For most students using mobile devices is second nature – having used such devices since childhood. By the time they reach college, many students will have used such technology to support and develop their learning styles. Therefore, some educators believe that it makes little sense for students to put such learning on pause when they come to the college classroom. Denholm (2013) asserts that students should be allowed to use mobile devices in class just as they use them outside of class. This assertion coincides with Murray & Olcese's (2011) argument that students need more technological skills in order to be motivated and competitive in the future. Mobile technology is an intricate part of the world for which students are being prepared.

The concept of using mobile learning for motivational purposes channels the position of many educators that learning environments should stimulate and sustain students' motivation to learn. Students need to know that education is not always theory and time consuming, but also exciting and fascinating. Students are motivated to learn when topics and activities capture their attention. Integrating students' devices and technologies that they normally use for other purposes to capture their attention presents a paradigm shift in education.

Interestingly, the adoption of mobile devices for educational use is not really a phenomenon. Traditionally,

education has adopted devices that were originally created for the corporate environment. Examples include desktop computers, simulation software, and Microsoft Office applications – just to name a few. Traxler (2010) describes this phenomenon as education's 'parasitic' relationship with technology. However, despite past and potential successes of technology integration, some educators question the use of mobile learning devices in today's classroom.

Concerns about Mobile Learning

A review of the literature reveals that more educators are open to the idea of mobile learning as this vehicle for learning has become more widespread. However, valid concerns remain.

A common fear exists that such devices will interfere with the explanation of theories via traditional teaching methods. Faculty's mission is to prepare students for the real world. They are the builders of students' sustainable knowledge. Their hope is that when students leave the classroom they will be well-equipped to successfully accomplish certain types of task in a certain type of field.

Understandably, educators may view mobile learning devices as a distraction and a barrier to this mission. For example, one study investigating the use of laptops during class found that students took less notes and were less engaged (Murray & Olcese, 2011). Similarly, Sample (2012) reports that 75 percent of 600 students surveyed indicated that the use of laptops during class increased the time they spent on non-course activities.

In addition, educators also question the impact of mobile learning on critical thinking. Some believe the close proximity of technology limits a student's ability to analyse and reason on concepts so as to develop their own answers and opinions. When presented with questions for class discussion, students may be inclined to simply "Google it."

The literature also contains arguments questioning the weak conceptualisation of mobile learning (Park, 2011; Wali, Winters & Oliver, 2007; Kurubacak, 2007). Patchers, Bachmair & Cook (2010) contend that it is a challenge for educators to rationalise the use of mobile learning without the existence of a comprehensive theoretical or conceptual framework to support the relationship between mobile learning and education. Apart from this challenge, some educators simply find it difficult to develop appropriate mobile learning activities to support their coursework.

Despite the reluctance of some educators to embrace it, mobile learning continues to evolve. As revealed in the literature, a number of educators from various disciplines have been able to successfully integrate mobile learning into the classroom. The following information provides one experience.

Overview of the Course & Project

The course BMKT N200 Marketing Fundamentals was taught at Abu Dhabi Women's College, Higher Colleges of Technology during the 2011-2012 academic year. Two student sections – BUAD 11 and BUAD12 – were assigned a market research project. The project required students to work in small groups. Each group was assigned a different brand of consumer products for which they were to research the brand, organisation, market segments, and marketing opportunities. The project presented students with four primary tasks:

1. Design a questionnaire capable of collecting useful data.
2. Conduct research using a focus group and analyse results.
3. Analyse and interpret a set of data.
4. Use research findings to compile a clear and concise marketing research report.

The questionnaire was necessary to determine customers' current needs and wants, potential changes to customers' needs and wants, existing market segments, and potential changes to existing segments. Furthermore, the survey was to assist in identifying potential new segments, customer psychographics, and customers' buying behaviour. Students were instructed to conduct the survey on a representative sample of appropriate size.

Mobile Learning Implementation

Students used their personal mobile devices - Toshiba and HP tablets, iPads, iPhones and BlackBerrys – to create and deploy their online survey instruments. They later used the devices to collect survey results. College staff in the educational technology unit assisted in providing full access to a platform that students could use for their online surveys prior to deployment. Students used SelectSurveyASP Advance - the same platform used for internal surveys at ADWC. During the class, the instructor provided students detailed instructions to access and use the programme.

Once the surveys were developed and uploaded, students focused on collecting data. To collect survey results, students went beyond the typical step of sending invitational emails to participants. Students made use of their mobile devices to collect on the spot data from participants instantly. Using the touch screen feature of their devices, students were able to present their survey instruments to faculty, staff, and students throughout the college, making the class assignment more interactive. Learning was literally going beyond the walls of the classroom.

Furthermore, technology provided the students with easy and timely access to their surveys which allowed them to monitor the work in progress and correct any small

mistakes. Having instantly collected the data, students then used their mobile devices to extract and analyse the data so they could make inferences about the market.

Project Outcomes

The experience had a number of positive outcomes. Students were able to creatively and innovatively carry out the tasks of the project using technology they were familiar with. They eagerly responded to the invitation to use their mobile devices for data deployment and collection. As soon as students heard that they were going to use their phones and tablets, all of them were excited to create the required surveys. In some cases, students stayed after classes so that they could start on the project the same day. They wanted to create and test a sample survey on their devices.

Research passed from 'irrelevant' in the minds of students to 'essential' in a matter of seconds. Before learning they would be using mobile devices, students had a less than enthusiastic response to the project. This changed once they learned they could use their cellphones and tablets in class to carry out the project. The change in reaction and behaviour was significant.

Using their mobile devices to collect data appears to have increased their performance. Students who needed only twenty surveys collected more than twice that amount. This was due in part to that fact that they simply enjoyed the dynamics of the data collection process. Students appeared to be more committed than usual. They openly shared their results and spoke enthusiastically about the process because it was different and appealed to them.

Benefits of Implementing Mobile Learning

The instructor noted a number of benefits as a result of implementing mobile learning for the market research project. Students were fully engaged and involved in the project. Their concentration and motivation were above average when compared to previous classes that completed the same project without the use of mobile devices.

Although the opportunity to use mobile devices captured students' attention and heightened their interest in the project, students actually learned the key concepts. They learned how to construct surveys and how to apply and study market concepts. Students gained knowledge of quantitative and qualitative research design methods, and they experienced the use of technology for the creation, deployment, collection, and analysis of data. Their mobile devices became learning aids and students explored the use these devices beyond their normal routine practices. Additionally, the project resulted in an environmental benefit. The use of technology allowed students to collect data without wasting unnecessary paper by printing and distributing multiple copies or variations of the survey instrument.

Student Reactions

At the conclusion of the project, the instructor solicited feedback from students regarding their opinion of the project. Students responded positively. A number of comments centred on their motivation to work on the project as a result of being able use mobile devices. Students described the project as fun and interactive. Several students commented on how much they enjoyed using their smartphones and iPads to complete the assignment. One student wrote, "I've been collecting data all over ADWC campus." Another stated, "Best project ever!" Clearly, based upon their performance and comments, students enjoyed the project.

Higher Education Implications & Recommendations

This project is but one example of how mobile learning can be interwoven into course projects and assignments. As highlighted in this experience, mobile devices can be ideal for deploying and collecting data. Similarly, these devices can be used for fieldwork assignments. A number of possibilities exist, but it appears that mobile devices heavily support active learning assignments.

As illustrated in the marketing research course, it is not always necessary to create an original mobile learning activity. Faculty can simply examine existing course projects to determine ways to embed mobile learning. Mobile learning is not a replacement of teaching and learning objectives. Instead, mobile learning should enhance assignments to capture student interest and improve engagement. The following highlights some best practices for the application of mobile learning:

- *Keep the process simple.* Instructors should avoid unnecessary complexity in the design of activities.
- *Encourage learner-generated content.* Instructors should do more than simply share materials with students. They should design activities that allow students to collaborate and share content.
- *Examine and rethink current approach to teaching.* Instructors would do well to examine current course assignment and projects. Perhaps some factors can be facilitated by means of mobile learning.
- *Ensure that assignments are relevant.* Mobile learning activities must relate to the theoretical concepts of the course, and student should see the connection. While mobile learning is used to facilitate theory in practice, the point of the activity should not be overshadowed by the technology.
- *Reflect upon and debrief the activity.* Once the mobile learning session concludes, instructors should summarise the activity and its overall meaning.

Conclusion

With sufficient forethought and guidance, mobile learning can be used successfully to enhance student projects. Notably, some educators remain concerned about the implementation of mobile devices. However, it must be acknowledged that the flexibility, availability, and appeal of such devices make them ideal for some assignments. The experience related in this article shows the value of mobile devices for research-related assignments and can be extended to other subjects and courses. More importantly, the experience shows the positive impact of mobile learning on student behaviour and performance. As these devices continue to evolve, many educators will continue to experiment and discover ways to effectively implement mobile learning.

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