Unleash The PDA

DISCUSSION PAPER

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Abstract

This short article examines a case for developing a series of participatory action research projects in addition to current projects funded by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) as part of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (AFLF) which foster learning experiences that imbed MMS screen capture utilising mobile technologies including mobile phones and the Personal Digital Assistant (PDA). There is an intent to explore within these projects how results of activities can be showcased via the Internet and on the world wide web.

The Technology

The uptake of mobile technologies which integrate internet browser capability, location services using GPRS and onboard multi platform software applications are emerging as the fastest growth area for digital communication. The rate of uptake by the business sector of these mobile technologies serves as an alert for changes in the patterns of communication which are now affecting the community and society at large.

The possibilities that these mobile technologies provide practitioners in the vocational education and training (VET) sector and the ability of these employees to integrate these mobile learning devices into the learning environment, are the cornerstone to engaging and retaining a component of an otherwise ‘dis’engaged cohort.

The Change

As evidenced by project outcomes from the ‘Txt Me: Supporting Disengaged Youth Using Mobile Technologies’ (Ison et al. 2004) the ramifications for the VET sector of the onset of Personal Digital Assistants (PDA) into the workplace as a key business and communicative tool are evident. The roll out of technologies, which integrate computer PC applications with mobile transportability, has the potential to exceed the already prolific use of mobile phones by youth aged between 15 to 19 years of age.
The transportability and ease with which to transmit data and communicate with others is the main appeal for youth who are often 'on the move' sourcing new friendships, investigating their environments and storing information for entertainment but even more recently, to undertake everyday transactions.

A large proportion of these data transactions now include 'ming-mong' activities where images, short video files and audio narratives are transmitted from one location to another. Considering that these youth have the ability to and will adopt the technology which advantages their workplace relations the most, any interactive experiences that 'unleash' learning potential utilising these mobile devices are of the utmost priority for the VET practitioner.

The merge between mobile phones and other 'multi-use' Personal Digital Assistants is possibly the most powerful innovation to date that enables the user to undertake tasks with accelerated performance. This performance is imbedded with learning outcomes that match many of the competencies sought by training practitioners and employers alike.

The Issue

According to the draft ‘Youth Advantage Strategy’ DEETYA Western Australia published in May 2004, despite the provision of online service delivery that interleaves flexible and negotiable training with traditional forms of delivery, a large number of students continue to drop out of secondary education for a variety of reasons.

Considering that this youth cohort disengage from the many forms of traditional settings and methodologies due to a variety of reasons other than those posed by modes of educational training, the need to tailor a curriculum that engages and retains these individuals is paramount. A high proportion of these youth that are at risk of disengaging, have often had negative experiences with education and training settings and are economically, socially and emotionally disadvantaged.
Youth who are at risk of disengaging with the traditional education or training sector are often highly engaged in activities that support their retention and inclusion in their respective peer groups. The mode of contact that occurs between these individuals often embraces mobile technologies and in many cases exceeds the level of face-to-face contact these individuals have with each other.

To embrace the changes that the internet and related digital interfaces including mobile phone networks offers the individual is in most cases the key to engaging a youth culture in valid learning experiences who can never remember a time when the internet was not connected worldwide.

**Digital Interfacing**

The interface between mobile technologies and other training delivery forms including online learning is no longer in its infancy. The opportunities that mobile technologies now offer the training sector and indeed many other parts of the community, have major ramifications for the VET sector employee already highly engaged in other static modes of electronic communication. There are many impacts upon learners and teachers alike as they grasp ways in which to harness and ‘unleash the PDA’ and these need to be articulated in projects that focus on the social, ethical and moral implications of the technology not just another myopic economic rationale.

**Conclusion**

High speed and wireless GPRS routed internet access now offers the youth of today an attractive option for accessing pertinent learning experiences. Learning experiences and training environments must now embrace the potential of these mobile technologies offer. Retaining individual students who are fully conversant with this technology now lies in the provision of learning experiences which use these mobile technologies that interface with the other digital divides that would otherwise exclude them.
Bibliography