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Choreo:pod: Dance and the iPod
Towards Blended Learning

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ABSTRACT

The iPod is a pervasive technology that has had an influential impact upon engagement with sound and visual media. The extent to which the iPod can act as a learning and teaching technology is still at an embryonic stage. The paper reports upon the research project entitled Choreo:pod which has explored the student creation of dance performance for the iPod screen, in addition to its use as a wider learning and teaching technology. The paper discusses the process students engaged in when reflecting upon their experiences of engaging with the iPod as part of a blended learning approach.

Keywords: *Blended Learning; Dance; Digital Literacies; Ipod*

INTRODUCTION

New digital technologies and multimedia are transforming how we teach and learn. They are transforming our classrooms from spaces of delivery to spaces of active inquiry and authorship. New digital media are empowering students to become researchers, storytellers, historians, oral historians, and cultural theorists in their own right…the digital format transforms students' capacity to synthesize, interpret, theorize, and create new cultural and historical knowledge. In this way, digital formats potentially democratize learning and produce critical subjects and authors. (Weis et al, 2002, p.153)

The University of Wolverhampton is a multi-campus institution based in the West Midlands conurbation of the United Kingdom with a commitment to widening participation, partnership and regional regeneration. The National Audit Office study 'Widening Participation in Higher Education in England' (2002) places our University with the highest percentage of students from the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups, 48%. Almost a quarter of students are from ethnic minorities and over half of all students originate from the local region. These undergraduates do not come to the University through the traditional route of academic writing, and are often the first person in their family to attend University. Learning

and teaching approaches are therefore required that promote engagement with a diversity of learners.

'Choreo:pod', began in the academic year 2005/6 as a pilot project and exists as part of a wider research project called Podagogy (www.podagogy.co.uk) at the University of Wolverhampton, where key members of the University's performing arts staff have been involved in exploring the use of iPods and related software, to support students in the performing arts disciplines. As an ongoing action research project sitting within the department of Dance Practice and Performance, the project has, as a result of research activity, become embedded in a final year module 'Dance Video Technology,' in which the concept of 'Dance for the Screen' forms the basis of the module. The module comprised of thirty students and has attracted the attention of both BBC Local TV and the Digital Network, commissioning a trailer to preview the broadcasting of student made 'Dance for Screen' videos. 'Choreo:pod' aims to give students the opportunity to advance their practice in dance and digital technologies, through the submission for assessment of a collaborative Dance for Screen work. This challenges traditional assessment norms in Higher Education Institutions in the UK, by drawing on and developing the student's visual and digital literacies, such as the stages of video making and collaborative and personal blogging. Students also develop their skills in choreography for the camera, performance-making, filming and editing techniques, visual design; and they studied the work of past and current practitioners in the field.

The impact of the iPod in challenging and informing artistic practice of both dance and screen-based performance remains at the heart of the Choreo:pod project. However from simple beginnings, the project has become a multilayered project that considers dance, the iPod and digital literacies - and takes a blended learning approach to student learning and assessment.

iPods for Learning

Produced by Apple incorporated, the iPod emerged in October 2001 as an audio device competing in the MP3 music player marketplace. Since its incarnation the iPod has become an iconic device that has popularised it amongst a mass market (Sterne 2006). The iPod has cultivated a perception of coolness amongst users (Reppell et al 2006) who use the device to control time and space (Bull 2005). The iPod has changed listening behaviours which can be more collective in nature and project a person's musical identity (O'Hara and Brown 2006, Bull 2006). Indeed, the popularity of the iPod has been due, in part, to what Beer (2008) describes as its "veneer of simplicity". A device that looks simple and is easy to use yet is masked by back end technology which is highly complex and sophisticated.

Though the primary focus of the iPod has been for leisure-based purposes, its potential as a learning technology has been given some attention (Dale 2008, in press, Dale and Pymm 2008, in press, Cooper et al 2009, in press). Indeed, the iPod has been through a number of transitions that have expanded its potential as a learning technology. Where as early generations merely had audio capability, later editions have incorporated sound and moving image. This is in addition to larger storage capacity and wi-fi connectivity (e.g. the iTouch). The iPod has therefore been described as a "miniaturised hybrid assemblage" (Farnsworth and Austin 2005) combining a sensory experience that can further engage learners in their studies. The iPod has the potential to be a disruptive technology (Berry 2006), which can influence the dynamics of the traditional learning environment where a lecture based instructional approach is still often seen as the norm in many higher education institutions. Previous research at Duke University in the United States analysed the use of the iPod as a learning technology. Duke University piloted the use of iPods during 2004 when all first year students were given an iPod to support their studies. What emerged was that the academic use of the iPod fell into five main