

## Chapter 9

# iPod Enhancement for Field Visits in Religious Studies

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter reports on a project to explore the potential of a mobile learning device (Apple iTouch iPod) to enhance student field visits to local places of worship, which are part of the Religious Studies degree programme. Places of worship are a valuable resource for student learning, but often the value of the visit is linked to the quality of information and the style of presentation by the faith informant. In addition, there is a particular problem for university students who need to go beyond basic information about history and artifacts to explore key concepts in situ. The project is a collaboration between staff and second year students to develop podcasts on local places of worship, which have been trialed by first year students. These podcasts include a range of media: video, audio, images, text, and hyperlinks to offer a rich learning experience. The podcasts link to theoretical issues in the study of religion to enhance the development of appropriate literacies for the discipline of Religious Studies. The chapter reports on the range of technical and other issues encountered, the way we responded to them, and our overall assessment of the potential applications for mobile learning during field visits.*

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## **PLACE OF VISITS WITHIN RELIGIOUS STUDIES**

Field visits are an important feature in our study of religions, enabling students to contextualise their theoretical study by exploring places of worship. This chapter shares our experiences in using the iPod Touch to enhance such visits. This project builds on a decade of developments linked to the use of technologies to enhance learning in this module *Religions in Wolverhampton*. This is an introductory level one module in which students explore the local religious landscape in a mix of class sessions and field visits. This approach provides a link between the theory and historical context provided in lectures and the findings on the ground in field visits. The module is innovative in terms of content, in setting religions within a local history framework, and innovative in approach in enabling students to develop their fieldwork skills alongside the ICT skills they use to present findings. The academic study of religion requires access to suitable materials for students to gain knowledge and develop their theoretical understanding. This has been a major challenge for this module due to the lack of published academic materials on religions in the locality, which has been addressed largely through the provision of electronic sources. Students are directly involved in this process as researchers, who are supported by the range of electronic sources, in their encounters with local religious communities.

Technology has been central to developments to make the study of local communities feasible in the absence of published sources for study. Thus, the institution's virtual learning environment and the development of a website on *Religion in Wolverhampton* made it possible to provide materials for local study. More recently the PebblePad webfolio opened up the possibility for interactive learning experiences which linked materials produced in past years with current research. These developments were reported by Burke, 2009, to explore aspects of e-Learning in dialogue. This

chapter takes the development a step further in assessing the contribution that the hand held iPod made to visits to places of worship,

These developments have resulted from a three way interaction between learners, the subject and technology. The learner category, for cutting edge technologies, has involved staff as well as students, and indeed staff from information technology (Dennet in Salmon et al. 2008) and the Institute for Learning Enhancement, as the application of technology in the new religious context required even IT experts to learn about situational issues. The subject aspect has been local religious communities, where our learning need has peeled away layers of information about particular communities. We have found this to be a kind of voyage of exploration as we discover more about the history, activities and practices of places, for example, previous visits to the Buddha Vihara did not uncover the historical collection held by the community, soon to be turned into a museum. Finally, the technology aspect has been crucial in offering new opportunities to access, process and record information about local religious communities.

This three way process has essentially been a dialogue between partners to explore potential applications of new technologies to learning situations. Thus, this chapter extends the dialogue to uncover the contribution of the iPod to learning during field visits to places of worship.

## **Religious Studies and e-Learning**

Religious Education (RE), in schools, and Religious Studies (or Study of Religions or theology) in higher education settings, is a strange subject. Cognitive psychologists identified problems students may encounter understanding religion due to its abstract nature. Goldman (1965) recommended that materials be linked to the level of student cognitive 'readiness.' This recommendation was applied by Grimmitt (2000) and Jackson (1997) in strategies to support experiential encounters

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