Chapter 3.9
Short Message Services for Supporting Student Learning: A Blended Approach

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ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the blending of anonymous short message services (SMS) with a learning management system (LMS) to support non-traditional postgraduate learners in a block release programme at a higher education institution. The personal ownership of the mobile phone, coupled with its consistent presence and connectivity, was enhanced through the provision of anonymous communication via SMS. The seamless integration allowed for optimal use by learners who had limited access to the LMS but greater access to the mobile device. The mobile phone enhanced with anonymity created a safe learning environment based on andragogical principles. The postgraduate programme made extensive use of the learning management system (LMS). In block release programmes, learners may be distributed in developing countries and have one contact week per module. During both pre and post-contact sessions, learners are located in contexts where mobile connectivity is more guaranteed than Internet access. Most resources are downloaded during the contact week for reading offline. As learners interact with resources they engage in internal dialogue and mobile phones can facilitate a way to artefact internal dialogues through blogging. The use of anonymous communication using SMS creates a safe and equal socially networked knowledge production environment.

INTRODUCTION

Blended learning is an integration (not a layering of one on top of the other) of face-to-face and online learning experiences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). It is the combination of conventional teaching approaches and e-learning elements within a single course or programme (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007).

Among other reasons, the increasing popularity of blended learning can be attributed to the manner in which it opens up educational opportunities to people excluded from accessing

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education. These exclusions are often due to an inflexible academic calendar or time constraints affecting attendance at full-time contact sessions. Ross and Gage (2006) pointed out that combining course and curriculum design with blended models (e.g., technology-supported courses, alternating face-to-face and online class meetings, videoconferencing to multiple class sites, or use of webcams) could increase the number of student enrolments in university programmes. While a focus on increasing enrolment numbers is desirable, the additional challenge of ensuring that learners successfully complete their study programmes within the prescribed time frame has to be considered. These issues and challenges require rethinking both the provision of learner support and design of learning activities in blended programmes particularly in cases where learners are distributed in developing countries that has limited access to Internet but have ubiquitous access to mobile networks. Without Internet access the educational affordances of blended learning cannot be realized. However, mobile learning is providing a new learning experience that is neither face-to-face nor online and is potentially changing the traditional notions of contact education.

The notion of contact education, as opposed to distance education, presupposes increased face-to-face interaction between learners and educators. Traditionally, attendance at a contact learning institution demands that learners physically attend prescribed and pre-registered courses in allocated buildings at specified times. This suggests that traditional contact education is defined in terms of purpose, time, space and distance. The purpose is the underlying agenda set for a particular meeting for example a seminar on teaching with Twitter to be held on Friday 19 November at 12h45-14h00 in the Centre for Educational Technology meeting room. The purpose, date, time and venue are set in advance and the attendees notified. The people go to attend meetings/seminars and meetings/seminars do not go to the people. Contact education is often inflexible, a person can only be at one meeting at a time, a venue can only hold one meeting at a time, and failure to converge and synchronize the date, time and venue could result in a person missing the event. Any change to purpose, date, time and venue needs to be communicated in advance. It is at the convergence of purpose, time, space and distance that face-to-face interaction happens in contact education. Whereas a blended approach based on an integration of mobile phones with LMS seeks to provide flexibility on purpose, time, space and distance. The teaching and learning challenges of non-traditional learners enrolling at a traditional contact institution cannot be addressed using traditional teaching approaches.

In this chapter, non-traditional learners, defined as adult learners not straight from undergraduate degree, who juggle work, family, and education. For these learners work and family is so imbedded that it is not practical to take leave from either to focus on education. These learners work and study full-time and have family responsibilities. Since 2007, the author has convened a postgraduate programme in Educational Technology for non-traditional learners at a contact institution. The programme, which attracts diverse international learners, makes extensive use of a learning management system (LMS) with high differentials of access but all learners had mobile phones for which educational uses were extremely minimal. It was this background that created opportunities to explore ways of blending anonymous short message services (SMS) with LMS to support non-traditional postgraduate learners. Mobile learning has potential to not only enable seamless learning across contexts, but also to mitigate some of the pedagogical challenges of blended courses through its ability to blend formal and informal learning as well as ubiquitous and institutional technologies. This argument is premised on the fact that nearly all students, regardless of their country of residence, either own a mobile phone or have access to one. Henschke (2010) observed that one of the challenges facing higher educa-