

Chapter 12

A Preliminary Evaluation of the iPad as a Tool for Learning and Teaching

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ABSTRACT

In May 2010, the release of the iPad in Australia brought a whole new dimension to learning. This chapter presents the preliminary findings of a pilot study conducted at a large distance education university designed to explore the use of the iPad as a tool for learning from three perspectives. The first is the use of the iPad from a lecturer's point of view, outlining how it can be used to enhance the task of teaching in distance education. The second is from a student's point of view, exploring how the iPad can assist in distance education study. The third examines the iPad from an insider perspective, reviewing the variety of apps available including those for social networking. The overall impression is that the iPad has great potential as a tool for learning but it will not necessarily reduce the need for desktop or laptop computers.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last ten years, the provision of distance education instructional materials has moved from paper to electronic formats. It can be argued that the motivation behind this change has been more to do with economics than pedagogy. While education providers can achieve considerable savings

by distributing materials either on CD-ROM or via the web, the cost of this is typically borne by the students. Students have lost the flexibility of studying using paper-based materials and have had to learn new ways of studying from on-screen materials. Alternatively, they have printed hard copies. When the shift to electronic formats began, most computers were desktop devices. Students

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had to work from where the computer was located, often having to overcome competition from the rest of the family for access. At the time, laptop computers were not common, tended to lack power, had poor battery performance and needed to be in range of a local wireless network in order to connect to the Internet, or close enough to a hub to connect via a cable. When evaluations of distance education courses were undertaken, the most common criticism was 'I cannot study when taking the kids to sport on Saturdays' (Education student feedback). Since then, laptop computers have become more common, more powerful, battery performance has improved and, with the advent of the 3G network, have been able to offer widespread Internet access. However, a laptop computer can still be physically inconvenient to use, especially at those times and situations available for many students for study.

BACKGROUND

The advent of smart phones such as the iPhone has improved the mobile learning situation as they offer mobility through both Wi-Fi and the 3G network. Such devices enable access to resources such as Learning Management Systems (LMS),

email and 'apps' (iPad, iPhone and iPad applications) developed specifically for education. An additional advantage is that a mobile phone is a personal device so students can access resources without having to overcome competition from other family members. However, battery life is still limited and small screens can make reading difficult.

Figure 1 shows the different devices currently available for students to access their online instructional materials. The devices have become smaller and more powerful.

The introduction of the iPad in May 2010 in Australia brought a whole new dimension to learning. Within the first eighty days of its release, 3 million units were sold (Ogg & CNETNews.com, 2010) indicating that a very strong user-base has been established. This suggests that it will be financially viable to develop the iPad for educational use. The iPad offers a much larger screen than typical mobile devices and up to ten hours of battery life. It has been under development for the last three years and is based on the same tried and tested technology as the iPhone and iPod Touch, which have been available since 2001 (Fightube.com, 2007). In addition, many of the 250,000 apps (Hanlon, 2010) developed for the iPhone and iPod may be used directly on the iPad.

Figure 1. Advances in computer technology



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