Providing Simulated Online and Mobile Learning Experiences in a Prison Education Setting: Lessons Learned from the PLEIADES Pilot Project

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the preliminary findings, design criteria and lessons learned while developing and piloting an alternative to traditional print-based education delivery within a prison environment. PLEIADES (Portable Learning Environments for Incarcerated Distance Education Students), was designed to provide incarcerated students with access to internet-independent secure digital and mobile technologies. An internet-independent version of Moodle was developed to complement course readings deployed on eReaders. The aim of the project was to increase access to and participation in higher education courses that are increasingly offered exclusively online. The article begins with an overview of the current provision of education within prison environments and introduces the rationale for commencing the project. The research findings of the project trial are discussed and the paper concludes with the lessons learned and implications for further research, development and implementation.

Keywords: Design-Based Research, Digital Inclusion, Distance Learning, E-Readers, Higher Education, Incarcerated Students, Mobile Learning, Prisons, Stand Alone Moodle

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are increasingly leveraging mobile learning and other digital technology initiatives in order to remain competitive in the modern knowledge-based economy. The use of mobile technologies has become essential in the delivery of distance education courses, largely in response to an emerging demand for flexibility in learning (West, 2012; Jeffrey et al., 2011). Even so, the Learning Management System (LMS) has become the principle tool used by institutions to deliver electronic course materials or activities in both the face-to-face and external delivery modes. The use of the LMS has enabled students...
to engage with peers in collaborative and interactive learning experiences and benefit from the motivation and support provided synchronously or asynchronously by the course facilitator. Unfortunately, this increasing reliance on the LMS and other digital technologies is based on the assumption that students have reliable access to the internet. For many students this is not the case, for example forty-four per cent of the students who participated in the University of Southern Queensland's (USQ's) Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) in Semester 2 2012 claimed they did not have access to the internet (USQ, unpublished data). Consequently, this increasing reliance on mobile and digital devices for learning increases the risk of further excluding disadvantaged students without reliable access to the internet from engaging in learning (Hancock, 2010).

The PLEIADES (Portable Learning Environments for Incarcerated Distance Education Students) project piloted the use of secure elearning and mobile learning technologies that are independent of the internet, for learning within a correctional centre. Incarcerated offenders are prohibited from accessing the internet in any way and are therefore generally excluded from accessing course materials electronically. In order to address this exclusion, for this project, course materials were loaded onto eReaders that were incapable of accessing the internet. Additionally, an internet-independent version of the open source LMS, Moodle, was developed and piloted over a seventeen-week semester period in a Queensland correctional centre. **TPP 7120 Studying to Succeed**, a foundation course in USQ’s Tertiary Preparation Program, was modified to provide incarcerated students with access to course materials, learning experiences and assessment activities, without needing access to the internet.

The project aimed to provide a viable means for students without internet access to benefit from the advantages afforded by the inclusion of mobile and digital technologies in learning and teaching. Though this pilot project was targeted at incarcerated students, project outcomes would be applicable to students from regional, rural and remote communities, low-socio economic status backgrounds, remote Indigenous communities and students located in countries without reliable internet access due to poor information and communications technology (ICT) infrastructure. The project was designed and implemented using the principles of design-based research, informed by on-going cycles of qualitative interviews and focus groups with participants and key stakeholders. This data was complemented by reflections from the project team informing iterative changes to the processes and design of the project. The overall aim of the project was to address the need for a sustainable solution to overcome the challenges of providing learning opportunities to students without reliable internet access.

This paper describes the design and implementation of the initial phase of the PLEIADES pilot project, presenting the findings of preliminary research activities conducted with participants and stakeholders prior to and directly after the first phase of the trial. The paper also reports on the lessons learned from these experiences that were used to further refine the project design for further development and implementation of the technologies. This pilot project aimed to test the viability of a solution for delivering courses electronically in the absence of internet access, rather than evaluating the impact of these technologies on student learning outcomes or course retention rates. The discussion focuses on preliminary responses to the technologies and implications for future iterations of the project.

**REVIEW OF PRISON EDUCATION AND CURRENT INITIATIVES**

Bedford (2007, p. 48) clearly articulated the educational disadvantage experienced by prisoners in Australian jurisdictions. He concluded that the formal education levels of Australian prisoners in 1991 were considerably lower than those of the general Australian population. Though this data is some twenty years...
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