Beyond Classroom: The Uses of Mobile Phones by Female Students

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how a group of undergraduate female students in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) use mobile phones to support informal learning related to the content of their courses. It also addresses the usefulness of informal learning activities to support students’ formal learning. Data were collected using a survey and focus group interviews. Main findings show that students performed informal learning mainly from home and interacted with key individuals. Overall, students used basic mobile phone applications which they found useful to their learning. The paper discusses key themes emerging from the findings and makes a contribution towards understanding the uses of mobile technologies in informal learning settings within a non-Western culture. Recommendations for future research are also discussed.

Keywords: Culture, Curriculum, Informal Learning, Mobile Phones, Mobile Technologies

INTRODUCTION

Research has suggested that students not only engage in a variety of informal learning activities outside school but also use a wide range of technologies to support their learning (e.g., Somekh, 2007; Selwyn, Potter, & Cranmer, 2009; Sefton-Green, 2004; Grimley & Allan, 2010). More recently, mobile technologies have increased the opportunities for informal learning. Students may access information and communicate with people at any time and from any location. They may use these devices dynamically in different contexts thus creating opportunities for rich and authentic learning experiences (Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula, & Sharples, 2004). Mobile technologies provide students with increased autonomy and control of learning activities, meaning that they can choose when, how and what they want to learn.

A number of studies have explored students’ use of mobile technologies outside the classroom context. For example, several projects investigated uses of mobile technologies in museum and art gallery contexts (e.g., Sharples, Meek, Vavoula, Lonsdale, & Rudman, 2007; Pierroux, 2008; Kukulska-Hulme, Sharples, Milrad, Arnedillo-Sánchez, & Vavoula, 2009). A project by Sharples et al. (2007), for instance, aimed to connect the classroom with museum visits. They reported that students could capture photos, write notes, make voice recordings and

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view small presentations on museum exhibits. However, during students’ visits to the museum, the teacher had little control over students’ activities. Other researchers focused on mobile technology use in students’ everyday lives (e.g., Clough, Jones, McAndrew, & Scanlon, 2009; Pettit & Kukulska-Hulme, 2007; Clough, 2005). Some researched specific informal learning activities using mobile technologies such as social interactions or entertainment (e.g., Kukulska-Hulme & Pettit, 2009) while others have looked at both formal and informal learning activities (e.g., Cook, Pachler, & Bradely, 2008; Breuer, Konow, Baloian, & Zurita, 2007).

The above studies have significantly contributed to understanding how students use mobile technologies outside the classroom, which may inform the design of formal and informal learning activities. However, the majority of these studies have been conducted in Europe and North America. For this reason, Cheung and Hew (2009) recommended investigating mobile technology uses within other countries to understand how cultural contexts might influence their use. Campbell (2007) added that distinctive cultural characteristics may influence how mobile technology is used. Wei and Kolko (2005) found, for example, that Uzbek women were conservative in their use of mobile phones outdoors. The authors concluded that to effectively understand the uses of mobile phones in a society, it is recommended to investigate them within the cultural context.

Taking into account the need for studying mobile technology use in cultures other than Western ones, we aim to explore how a group of undergraduate students in the United Arab Emirates use mobile phones to support informal learning. We chose to focus on mobile phones because they are very popular among Emirati students. While exploring mobile phone use, we will investigate the usefulness of informal learning activities to support student learning. As observed by Wei and Kolko (2005) this type of study is particularly valuable. Therefore, we expect to shed light on how mobile phones are used to support informal learning within the UAE culture. The following sections include a discussion on informal learning and approaches to studying mobile technology use followed by a description of the methodology. The next sections present and discuss the results and end with a conclusion and recommendations for future work.

Informal Learning

Although mobile technologies are seen as facilitating learning outside the classroom, defining informal learning is difficult and it is a topic of continuous discussion among researchers. For example, some view informal learning as occurring outside the classroom without any direct connection to curricula or instructors (e.g., Livingstone, 2001; Sefton-Green, 2004). In the absence of a formal learning structure, the learning goals are determined by the students (e.g., Laurillard, 2007). Goals and learning processes can be defined in advance by the students or goals and learning processes may unfold unintentionally whenever a learning opportunity arises (Vavoula, 2004).

Informal learning is also viewed as involving some links to formal learning (e.g., Cook et al., 2008; Sharples et al., 2007). In this sense, there is continuity between formal and informal learning contexts. However, the learning approaches are more informal than those usually adopted in a curriculum (Scanlon, Jones, & Waycott, 2005). For example, Sharples et al. (2007) showed that while there was a connection between classroom activities and informal learning, students were in control of their activities outside the classroom. This is similar to Mann’s (2008) views on a convergence of formal and informal learning in which informal learning activities are linked to the curriculum. For the purpose of this paper, we view informal learning as occurring outside the classroom, intentionally or unintentionally, without instructors’ involvement. As discussed, students may be involved in a variety of informal learning activities (e.g., Clough et al., 2009). In this study, we will focus our investigation on informal learning activities that are related to the students’ studies.
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