Project*: Using Mobile Devices as Learning Tools for Alternative Teaching and Learning Models*
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June 28, 2011 via Skype

Q. If you could just give an introduction as to who you are, what your role is, your role in this project?

Adele: My name's Adele Cushing. I'm the E-Innovation Manager at City and Islington College in London. I only started this job in April this year, 2011, so I was previously the E-learning Manager at Barnet College, which is in North London. And that's where I did this particular project, the MENTOR ME, mobile-enhanced mentoring, and that was a couple of years ago, so actually last year we continued that and we did a couple more mobile learning projects with a couple more cohorts as well.

Q. How did MENTOR ME get started? What problem was being faced that needed to be solved?

Adele: Well, I'd worked in teacher training in a previous job, so I approached the teacher training manager at Barnet and asked her if there was a way that we could encourage the use of mobile learning through teacher training, really. It seemed a good way to kind of impact the organization in terms of just getting them to trust mobile learning as a concept, to start with teachers and lecturers who were on the teacher training course, who also staff in the college and would therefore use what they learned with students in lessons and things. So we talked, and essentially there was- there's always a pressure, time pressure, in further education, generally any education with mentors and mentees getting time to kind of meet regularly with each other, and it hadn't really been happening. So we looked at how we could use personal learning devices to kind of equip the people on the teacher training course on the mentors to kind of be in a bit more regular contact. And actually, at a very basic level that turned out to be email-enabled smartphones.

Q. What was the approach to integrating those into the mentorship?

Adele: Well, we met regularly with the mentors, because they had additional roles within the college. They were already subject learning coaches and working in different departments in terms of teaching and learning, mentoring teaching and learning generally, and then had been assigned to a number of students within the teacher training course as well. So we had regular once-a-month meetings anyway, and so what happened when all the devices turned up, we had to get them all set up. We had an apprentice to help us do that, which was fantastic, because he had to do mobile devices as part of his apprenticeship, so he kind of learned on the job, set them all up, and then we had one of our meetings quite soon after that. And we spent probably about an hour, maybe a little bit more, just kind of going through. We didn't have all the same devices because we'd applied for external funding and we'd been advised that in order to have more chance of getting the funding, that we should use different models of phone. But actually in terms of the management of such devices, I wouldn't recommend doing that, the fact that you

Submitted by Natasha Boskic (natasha.boskic@ubc.ca), July 2012

have to then support all these different types, and you have to train people to use different types of smartphone isn't ideal. And also in terms of sustainability, it was a lot to kind of organize the borrowing and things. And as it was a couple of years ago, we couldn't rely on people having their own devices that would do the things that we wanted them to do. And it was very new in terms of setting them up to link in with the college email and things. So we were kind of starting that process, but as a result of that year and having those things in place, we then were in more of a position where we could get students and staff to use their own devices, and in the last year or so, it's become a bit more ubiquitous in terms of people having these sort of more powerful smartphones themselves. So in terms of sustainability, that's the way we've kind of moved forward. We only had, I think it was about forty, forty-five devices, but that was enough to kind of manage.

We had to self-teach all the different devices and then teach others, but it did really help having a nineteen-year-old on the team. And I think that we learned that in the future we would want to involve students more in terms of actually supporting lecturers. I think it brings the students into being more involved in a project as well, and can be really good for employability skills for young students.

Q. Were there any other challenges and hurdles you ran into?

Adele: Um, well, there was another hurdle about iPhone envy! We called it phone envy. And it kind of confirmed how well Apple did with their marketing, that everyone thinks that the iPhone is the best device. And the difficulty that we had was that we couldn't block calls on the iPhone. I think you can do it now, but at the time we didn't really know how to, and also we sort of felt that it didn't have the office software on either, so it wasn't going to be compatible with the documents that the teacher trainers were going to be using. So there was a number of reasons why we didn't give the students on the course iPhones, but at the same time we wanted to evaluate iPhones for their potential, because they were quite new at the time, and there hadn't been a lot done for education, so we wanted to evaluate those as well. So we got about seven for project leaders, people in the libraries that were supporting the loans, to kind of involve people in the project. And so it was interesting, because there were one or two- they were all adults, and the mentors and the students, and you could see there were one or two people got the hump, because they didn't have an iPhone and some of us as leaders had iPhones because we knew we weren't going to make calls on them and we trusted ourselves, kind of thing. That was another reason for thinking, well, next time we'll get every one the same, because then there wouldn't be those issues in people. It's interesting how people can get a bit upset about something like that, and then actually that can stop them from being completely involved in the project. But we made the best of what we had, and we kind of overcame that to the point where those people who'd been a bit reticent at the beginning of the project, by the next year when they were involved within their own curricular area, they were really enthusiastic about it and took it on into other subject areas, so that was really pleasing.

Q. How were mentors prepared to use the technology? Were there ongoing meetings or support?

Adele: Yeah, as I said, we were having monthly meetings anyway, so then when people came back they were letting us know if there were any issues and they were sharing practice amongst themselves as well and kind of giving anecdotal contribution to the project report in that way. I think in terms of moving on into what we've moved on to since, with people using their own devices, there can still be that class divide issue, and it was useful for us to have the devices from the previous project, we took them back in at the end of the project, apart from people who had been using them regularly, and made a good case that they're going to carry on using it for teaching and learning. So that meant we did have some spare ones, and so when we then used it with other students who're doing what you're doing, taking pictures for portfolios, et cetera, some students didn't have the type of phone that would make a good picture. So I mean obviously they can use a digital camera, and that was of course a recommendation, if they have a digital camera, they can do that. But some students feel a bit self-conscious if they don't have what everyone else has got. So at least we were able to loan it out. And one of your questions about accessibility, one of the case studies that we did was all about a visually impaired student who benefitted from the iPod Touch. And having used a number of different devices, he found the interface the best for him to be able to engage with the things that he needed to for learning, but also anecdotally there was a young girl who didn't have a phone, very kind, and she was borderline, do we need to assign a learning support person to this young girl? But we gave her a smartphone for a term, and she kind of then integrated into the group, cause her friends have got phones and she felt part of that, and she actually kind of flourished in terms of learning, and actually then they didn't need to assign her a learning support person. So I mean that's quite an anecdote, I don't really have any evidence and such, just from the person who said to me, can we loan her a smartphone? But that's something that I want to pursue in terms of bridging this sort of digital divide, and also in terms of students that might sort of be on the fringes of learning and kind of at risk, I suppose, of dropping out of something. So that would be an interesting angle to pursue, I think.

Q. That's interesting. I had thought of the use of various tools for accessibility, but was thinking of mobile phones as more of a hindrance rather than enabling.

Adele: I don't know if you're familiar with an organization in the UK called TECHDIS. They work with JISC, Joint Information Systems Committee. They're a sort of part of JISC, and they have done a lot of work in terms of promoting mobile learning to bridge accessibility gaps and to support students with various learning difficulties or physical impairments or something. So they have recommended for a long time about using these mobile devices which, as you'd say, you'd think that would be perhaps be difficult, but they don't seem to be, and I suppose as well, I mean obviously in terms of access, because it's so much a part of peoples' lives now, we've sort of found that we didn't have to do as much technology teaching when students are using their phones, as you would if they're using a computer. So (inaudible) finding a way around, and quite quickly, because this is part of every day- they have it on them all the time, so they can explore it then.

Q. Was that student one of the teacher-trainees as well, part of the program?

Adele: No, that was different, that was somebody in- actually in foundation learning, which is very basic, students with learning difficulties and things.

Q. So that wasn't something you were aiming for, but sort of a pleasant side effect.

Adele: Yeah. And I think that was the beauty of doing something with lots of teacher, teacher trainers, really, just kind of have that, because once they'd had a bit of coaching, they can apply the pedagogy themselves.

Q. What were some of the ways that they used the devices that did surprise you? I know there's a few in the paper.

Adele: Yeah, I think probably the ones that are in the paper. The art teacher who attached his mobile phone to the projector and then used it as like a document visualizer, so they had work around the classroom and he just held the camera over it and it projected it onto the big screen so that all the class could see everyone's work a bit closer range and be able to do a kind of group assessment and feedback and things. So that was fantastic, because I didn't even know the devices could do that when we bought them. And he was quite a lead practitioner, so he was doing that. And then things like recording essays, listening back to them. If you've got English as a second language, speak your writing and listen back to it. Some higher education students have done that in terms of looking at the structure of what they're trying to communicate in the writing. And we did mainly promote the multimedia functions, the voice recorder, the camera, the video, which most phones have. With the mentoring project, we always had the email enabled and it was all set up. But with other projects you can't necessarily rely on that, so it's a question of picking the common denominator of what's going to be on most phones, and those kind of multimedia functions are usually the case. Increasingly, people are using the camera on their phones to kind of take pictures of things they said as like an aide-mémoire anyway, and then you've got the practical work, like you're saying, building an eportfolio and taking video and doing interviews and things. We've had people who've been doing things with text messaging, which is sort of surprising, but considering that most students, when they come in they know how to text message, that's the thing that they most use their phones for. So in terms of building in literacy exercises and doing summaries in 160 characters and (inaudible) texting. And there's a system in the UK called the text wall, which if you Google it will probably come up top. It's created by a company called Xlearn, and it's just a wall of text, so you can ask questions in class and people can text the answer and it will come up. And you can do an assessment via that as well. So there are things that are kind of happening now as a result of some of these projects from before that kind of grow in lengths and moving forward.

Q. What would you say the results were of the project? What was the general feeling and response?

Adele: Yeah, I think that the main impact for me that was worth the budget was the sort of organization change in the way that the senior roles recognized the potential for mobiles in

teaching and learning, and this particular project was identified by our inspector at Ofsted with the partner university as being an outstanding practice in terms of mentoring and kind of people keeping in touch, with the phones and sharing practice and with the different ideas of teaching. I mean, the actual lesson observers - well, they had iPhones, which was very fast in terms of taking a video and emailing it, and giving feedback to the students straightaway after class, saying, "I videoed this part of your lesson, this is what you did, this is what you could improve on." And that kind of immediacy, really. And also in terms of cutting down on travel time for some of the observers. If they couldn't make it out into the communities where people were teaching, the students were encouraged to record video of their own sessions and things. And actually they reported that they felt less nervous, and they felt less hindered about what they were doing, so it actually helped them to perform better.

Q. What advice would you have for others trying some sort of a similar project?

Adele: I think, well, first of all, to sort of be clear about what you're trying to achieve, and as you say, if you've a problem that you're trying to solve, I think that that really gets people on board. And working with managers that I worked with in this past year, in one situation we were looking at mobile phones for study skills and seeing how we could get a level three student to progress into higher education, so (inaudible) to go on to university, and these were adult learners that were working in healthcare and wouldn't necessarily want to do a degree. And so we looked at how they could use their mobile phones to capture the study skills that they would need at level four, a degree level, to kind of give them the confidence that the work that they're doing in practice, and the study that they're doing, is actually- they are actually capable of doing a degree, to kind of give them that confidence, really. So they were using their voice recorders to kind of reflect on things that they'd been learning and so for analyze things in the workplace and that kind of thing. So all the skills that we give labels to, that degree level, and people are doing it in everyday life, but they might not have the opportunities for education at a younger age. So we were kind of looking at that, and that was a pretty successful project. And then we also were looking at retaining students in the course that had a quite high dropout rate, really. And these were beauty students, and they had to use multimedia to sort of prepare them for their working lives and things, so we looked at making sure that they didn't pull out of the course after two months and that they stayed the length of the year. And they used their own phones to take pictures of the work and build it into an eportfolio with a comment on each others' work and improve their work that way. So they were two very clear objectives. This is what we want to achieve for this, and we're just going to use these devices as a tool to improve the teaching and learning and support the students' success. Because that was our aim, and it wasn't just about oh, we want to use a few mobile phones, we kind of had the buy-in from the lecturers, because they wanted to see that was going to be the case as well. And they put a lot of time into learning about new devices. We were able to give them some new devices, but they also used their own, and some of them actually invested their own money in getting a good mobile phone, because they'd seen the potential of teaching and learning. And increasingly, finding that students, if they're asked to- well, you need a smartphone for this course, some of them are willing to actually go out and get one, because the contracts are getting sort of reduced prices and things. So be clear about what you're wanting to achieve, and make sure you've got the right support in

place in terms of the technical support and the training and coaching to get the best use out of them. And then to have regular feedback sessions and feedback from the students as well. Lecturers can obviously get feedback from students and see how they're responding to the lessons and how they've improved. And to kind of share practice as well as you go along, really. I think that people who've been involved in projects have really felt like their confidence has grown in their own practice just by sharing with other people as well.

Submitted by Natasha Boskic (natasha.boskic@ubc.ca), July 2012