Project*: Using Mobile Devices as Learning Tools for Alternative Teaching and Learning Models*
University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. Canada

Steve Musson, Recreation Studies, Langara

Q. Could you give us an introduction and some background about your project?

A: I taught a course, Recreation 1160, Foundations of Leisure and Recreation. Started in January, ended in April. Started out with full registration of 35 and a waiting list of about 19. That's not normal for a foundations course that starts in January, but either a lot of people were interested in it and/or it was just a course that people could sign up for, so they signed up for it. I think we ended up with about 27 or 28 people making it through till the very end. And it went really, really well. It was one of the better courses I've taught, and partly that has to do with the mobile element to it.

Q. And they knew it was mobile coming into it?

A: It was in the course outline. All it said was it could be done using mobile devices, and that you did need a mobile device for the assignments. But I don't think that was a big bearing on people taking the course. What else? The mobile elements that were sort of front and center as mobile were the assignments. I'll just refer to them as the ideals assignment and as the scope assignment, and I'll just talk a little bit about those. So the ideals assignment, I presented 21 leisure ideals, actually 20 and then number 21 was any one that they wanted to add in the list, right? And so the sort of analogy I used was I'm giving them a library of ideals, kind of like in iTunes. A library of ideals from which they will choose their own playlist, and then they would- in the assignment, they would go out- they would choose six ideals, and then they'd go out and find those ideals happening in recreation somewhere in the community, and record that, usually through still pictures but they could do it any other way, right? The neat thing about that was when people started- so there's one main course blog, Wordpress blog, and then each student had a blog linked to it. And that kind of built up an energy of its own, and it kind of was like another textbook, if you will, but much more interesting, personal, and relevant. And I think it was not only because it was the students, but it was stories, and people love stories, and I think recreation students especially. So the mobile part is sort of very intertwined with the storytelling part, which is also intertwined with the pictures, because stories and pictures need to go well. Anyway, I started to kind of understand the power of that, that meaning not only the mobile offerings that were brought back, but that they were from peers. Okay? And then, so in the second assignment, I modified the schedule so that we had more time. There was an extra week where they could just go through the other students' material, and I used that for discussion questions as well as the assignment, and that just took off great.

Q. That's pretty powerful.

A: Yeah. The scope assignment is, I'm trying to get people to understand the scope of recreation and leisure, and so the assignment is a bit of- kind of like, I tell them it's kind of like a Harry Potter box with a spell and a couple curses on it. They really have to unravel it. But suffice it to say, they're going to give me, I think it's five examples of recreation, either recreation facilities, organizations, or programs. So the first one is pretty obvious, right? You just think of a community centre, right?

Q. Yeah.

A: But the trick- the charm, or the curse, or whatever, is that the second one has to be as opposite to the first one as possible, and then the third one has to be opposite to the first two, and then the fourth one has to be opposite to the first three, right? And I've done in face-to-face mode, and I've done it in mixed-mode, but it just seemed like- and I also had them present the first two in a blog, and then other people could see that for a week, and it was still a week more before the assignment was due. Again, when they're going, they have to find these organizations, facilities, or programs, and then go take pictures, record them somehow, right? Well, again, that's the mobile part, is now they're going out in their chosen community, whatever that is, and they really have to look. You cannot do this sort of sitting in an armchair, right?

Q. And it makes it less hypothetical and more rooted in reality, I guess.

A: Well, yeah, almost like reality in quotation marks, because the reality that they thought was that recreation is limited to community centres. Right? And they start to play this game, and a couple of students start to understand. The Hermiones start to understand (inaudible). But they're posting at the same time, right? And then people, other people are kind of a little slower, the Rons of the class are a little slower, and they start to get what's going on here, and then it just- it just really takes off. So anyway, by the end of the course I think most people kind of saw the power of the mobile part. The whole course wasn't mobile, but the power of the students having to go to the thing itself, ie., you know, recreation and leisure. Go to the thing itself, and then start to process their experiences through the concepts of the course. I'll be quiet for a bit. You can talk.

Q. No, that sounds pretty fantastic, just that it kind of forces them into a different perspective of it, and just getting out from behind the desk and out from behind the textbook and sort of seeing how this actually works in the real world.

A: Yeah, yeah. And also even more than that, cause these folks who take Recreation courses are usually pretty mobile anyway. But getting them out from behind their preconceived notion. For example, the big hint that I give them is I took some pictures of a roadside tattoo parlour in Cranbrook. And I say if you understand this assignment, you'll understand that that has the potential to be a high-quality recreation facility. And I don't know- who goes to get a tattoo for work? Right? It's like, wouldn't that have to be leisure? Wouldn't that have to be recreation? But once you start there, right, you start to understand. For example, something I say in the discussion forum is when I go to the barbershop in Kimberley, there's a barber and three other gentlemen. And so I walk in, and I go, "Oh, I'll come back when you're not busy." And the barber says, "I'm not busy." There's four gentlemen in the barbershop. They're all, you know, 60, 70 plus. At that point, that barbershop is a recreation facility, cause what are those gentlemen doing there, right? So anyway, it really starts- and I know that if both these assignments work, it's really hard for somebody to take a bus through town, let's say they go through a couple of municipalities, and not see a hundred instances of recreation and leisure.

Q. As you're saying it, I'm kind of- it forces you to rewire your brain a little bit to-

A: Exactly, that's the rewiring. But the important thing, and this is getting back to the mobile part of this, is that in the past, I would rewire their brain through what I'm trying to say, but this mobile part allows that same rewiring to happen through peer influence, and pictures, and recordings from the field. So that was quite good, and I think it really excited a lot of people. I think one last thing is even on the ideals assignment, which was the first one, I didn't quite understand the power of this stuff. But on the first one, when I opened up the first couple of student blogs, I was shocked at how most of the students, 70% of the students, were in my

opinion overperforming. Because of the blogs, I think. Just wanting to tell stories and stuff like that.

Q. Do you think it's because their peers were looking at it, or because they had more of an opportunity to be more creative with it, or because they had more control over it?

A: I think the first assignment, it wasn't because the peers were looking, because that didn't really hit, I don't think, many of us at the time. No, well, both of them had the peers looking in, but I don't think any of us really understood. Here's my analogy. Instead of being in a classroom where I'm talking, and then the student's talking, and another student's talking, and then there's usually kind of a set routine to who talks when kind of deal, and who doesn't, this was more like, we're all coming to the classroom and everybody's got a show and tell. And people could visit at their leisure other people's show and tells, which again I think is the mobile obviously isn't- the blogs themselves aren't mobile, and neither is the online part of the course, strictly speaking. But the mobile part is what they were showing and telling.

Q. And what you say about everybody having more of a voice, that's come up with some of the other case studies as well, where there's a class of hundreds of people and they get into small groups and tweet their responses to things. So you get people responding who, if you were asking for hands to go up in the classroom, they would never put their hand up. But when they can be the representative, there's a lot more participation and creativity involved.

A: Yeah, yeah, and so that definitely happened here, and so maybe it's a theme that goes through many of the case studies. That's exciting to think it would be.

Q. So were there other faculty involved? Did you have to get buy-in from other people to bring in the mobile component, or was it something you did on your own?

A: I didn't have to get much buy-in. The other faculty that were involved would be from the Educational Technology department. They had to help. I'm not a computer guy by nature, so they had to help me sort of figure out a whole bunch of stuff. The other buy-in, I suppose, was from the department chair. That was pretty easy, too. So yeah, I didn't have a whole lot of struggle there. Yeah.

Q. That's come up in a few studies where there's more than one person teaching the class, and one person is very enthusiastic but has to get the other faculty interested. Then when they see it working, they go "Oh, okay, I get it," and more people start to get on board. But sometimes there's a bit of an uphill battle just to get the first trial launched.

A: Yeah, and I think I heard that from other instructors who were doing a sort of sister project at Langara. I think what we learned from that was if the mobile part of the course is really an add-on that doesn't really have to be there, then- this would be student buy-in, I'm talking now. The students will- "why are we doing this" kind of deal, right? But I mean, I got student buy-in from most students of "well, if this is a course on the foundations of leisure and recreation, you're going to go out there and you're going to find evidence," so that didn't seem to be a problem. The only problem I got from a few students was how much work it was. It seemed to be, at least from my perspective, relative to how much interest you had in the topic, so it's like, if you're really not interested, then it kind of works itself out, guys. You know. Students in leisure and recreation are really quite interested in that topic, and I had, because of the nature of the registration, I had I think a higher than normal percentage of English as a second language

students. And I think that was very interesting for them, too, because they didn't have to listen to me as much. Understand a few things and go out and take these pictures and create these stories, and there was some pretty powerful stories from some folks who were new to Canada, so that's cool.

Q. You really get to see a different perspective that if they had to write an essay on it, it might not have come across as well.

A: Just one quick example, so in the ideals one, this woman posts a story, and I almost cried. That's how good this story was. Not the English so much as- she had just come over three or four months- no, I guess it was in the summer. In the summer of 2011, from China with her husband and her daughter, very young daughter. And so this woman is writing, and she's saying how isolated she felt in her apartment. There's nobody who speaks her language in the apartment block, and she's feeling very isolated and homesick, and sort of questioning why she's come. Then one day, and I guess it's late August, she takes her daughter to Locarno Beach. And she said, and it was quite powerful. I don't think she meant it to be this powerful, but she said, she's sitting on the beach. Her daughter was singing all the way to the beach and singing at the beach, and she said, "It was the first day I understood that we've made the right decision and come to the right country." And sitting on this beach. And I'm thinking about this. I'm thinking, I mean, definitely this is recreation and leisure, cause it's sitting on a beach, right? And it's like, I wonder how many other countries you can sit on a beach and get that feeling of freedom. I mean, maybe not in Libya. Maybe not in Syria. Maybe not in Lebanon. I don't know. But Canada, you just sit on a beach, your daughter can sing, and there's not a bunch of secret police around, I don't think. So anyway, it was some powerful stuff that was- I didn't want a whole bunch of basketball stories, and soccer stories and stuff like that. We got our fair share of those, but for another student to realize the power of that recreation experience for that particular woman, coming new to the country, was pretty cool too.

Q. That's great. Were there any other cases where it surprised you how somebody used the technology?

A: No, because I actually constrained the use of the technology into a very specific format, because what I didn't want was to have marks dependent on people's comfort with technology. I wanted it on the concepts of the course, and so I think if there was another complaint it would have been that I created too much structure for these blog posts. But I knew why I was doing that.

Q. What were some of the challenges and pitfalls along the way? Anything that you would do differently next time?

A: The challenge was setting up the blog, but I think I can correct that now because I think I understand how that- it was my very first time with a blog, so. That was really the only thing. The amount of marking surprised me, but again I can probably fix most of that. It's just tough when you've got real genuine stories. You cannot assembly-line mark that stuff, right? Can't mark on a bell curve, not that I usually do, but it's- wow, what happens if people really put in a whole bunch of thought and actually nailed- it's not just that these are great stories, but because of this format that I forced them into, they had to speak through the language of the concepts of the course, and for some reason, more students than usual were really doing a really good job. And I'm thinking, huh, that doesn't say much for me as a (inaudible) instructor, when the totally online course gets a way better personally relevant score. So other than that, the pitfalls, nothing really came up. It was a lot of work but quite an enjoyable course for me to teach.

Q. Would you have any advice for anyone wanting to do something similar?

A: Yeah, I think only use the mobile if it really has the potential to get everyone to the next level. Don't use the mobile because it's a shiny device. Don't use the mobile because- I mean, and I'm guilty of it, thinking that because everybody has these devices, that somehow it's going to make it better. And that's just the case. It's like pedagogy over technology every time. If you can figure out the pedagogy and what it is you're trying to do, then the technology stuff will fall into place. But if you're just chasing the technology and the shiny mobile stuff, then I think everybody will see through that pretty quick.

Q. Did it matter what type of mobile it was? Were there any students who didn't have one, and just went out with a still camera or something like?

A: Well, this gets back to partly what we've been thinking about at Langara is, what's a mobile device? Now, a book is a mobile device. A notebook, a pad is a mobile device. Digital voice recorder. A camera is a mobile device. So if you take it that way, and that's how I took it, cause a student asked what is a mobile device? I said any device that you can walk around and- so really, what I was saying was for the ideals and for the scope, it's kind of like the detective situation. You have to go gather some evidence and prove in the ideals assignment that there are ideals exploding out there, and in the scope assignment to prove that there's diversity and variety out there. So the mobile device is anything that can record that. And so it turned out that most people probably had a smartphone, but if they didn't, then they could certainly use a digital camera.

Q. That's great. That's one of the things that is usually a concern. How do you accommodate everybody, because not everybody has the same technology, and what's the fallback plan? Do you require a certain device? But that sounds like you have the perfect gradient. You can use anything, it's just expanding the possibilities to include mobile devices.

A: That's right, and because the mobile doesn't really refer to the device, and here's the kind of conceptual shift. The mobile refers to the learner. I need to get the learner mobile, and that they need to record something is secondary, and it's really, really important, just because I want the students to create the textbook in the second half of the course, right? But it's the learner that needs to be mobile. The device is totally incidental but important, if you get what I'm saying.

Q. What's the plans for the future? What are you going to do and what would you like to be able to do with it?

A: Well, it's kind of like a door that I went through that I can't go back. I mean, it has implications for every course that I teach. And yet at the same time, I don't want to go mobile and blogs on everything, cause I think people get pretty tired of that. But certainly I'm launching a brand-new course in the fall. It's called The Analysis of Enjoyment, and it probably is really what started this whole thing for me in the first place, was a lot of enjoyment is mobile, and so that's where I got this idea of capturing evidence. So definitely in the fall I'll be teaching this enjoyment course where it'll have the same kind of thing with the mobile assignments, and I'm also teaching another 1160, but a mixed-mode one. And so I'll probably put some more in there. So what I'm going to do in the future is probably do some more, but make sure that it's always genuine and pedagogically sound as opposed to just more for the sake of more.

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

Q. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

A: Just that we went into this with a conceptual framework that- the project morphed, and I was going to do the enjoyment course funded through BC Campus. But for a lot of reasons, I couldn't actually pull that off, and so we did it on the Foundations course instead. Which I think was a really good change of course, obviously because the 1160 went so well. But part of the conceptual model was to somehow get student empowerment level higher through the use of mobile learning, like somehow the newish ability to share student experiences with each other was really where I wanted part of this whole project to go, and it did obviously go there in a few ways that I didn't even foresee. So I'm kind of fascinated with this idea of running a course where the students write the textbook, and that the writing of the textbook and the sharing of the textbook is in fact the course. And I think that's where I'm going next. I think the mobile devices, the mobile learning, the blogs will allow us to do that in a way that just heightens student interest.

Q. That's exciting. Looking forward to seeing what happens!