'It's easier to use my phone': An exploration of the use of mobile technology to communicate course information with Trainee Teachers

Background

The technological advantages provided by mobile technology are currently being explored in Higher Education with institutions investigating and implementing new ways of reaching and engaging students through their mobile devices. This paper describes an initial pilot scheme that examined how mobile technologies, specifically 'SmartPhones©' could be used with trainee teachers on placement in schools, to disseminate course information to them, building on previous work in this field (Bryan, 2004) and to capture good practice in doing so. After setting up a BlackBoard© (BB) site for the trainees at their request so that they had a common place to look for resources, and communicate with each other, a review at a university session revealed that this was not in fact working for them and they did not find accessing the site convenient either from home or school. A decision was then taken to utilise their mobile phones to replace the functions that would have been covered by the BB site, as a survey indicated that they each had some kind of SmartPhone© that they were using every day, and would prefer to receive academic information using this rather than via the VLE. For the remainder of their course, the tutor used text and email to communicate with the trainees rather than posting announcements and resources on the BB site.

This pilot is intended to be shared with greater numbers of trainees in the following academic year to see if the same positive results can be obtained with more trainees in similar situations. It does, however, raise questions about the funding and time put into creating spaces on a VLE for students (by universities and their tutors), only to find that they would prefer to use their phones.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was taken for this work, (Gorard, 2004) collecting and collating both quantitative data and quantitative data. The research followed the pattern of a small-scale evaluative case study (Bassey, 1999) with a view to improving practice for future cohorts. The approach was both interpretivist and evaluative.

Having taken this approach, the research included data derived from a number of sources to add rigour to the work through methodological triangulation (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). This range of data collection methods included:
- Questionnaires with trainee teachers to ascertain their views on the use of mobile technology during their course, using both open and closed questions.
- A focus group with the trainees to follow up their qualitative data from the questionnaires and further explore the issues raised therein.

Findings

An initial quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis of this data using suggests that trainees strongly prefer being able to access course information and communicate with their tutor via their phone rather than through a VLE.

Survey Data

The survey revealed that trainees accessed their phones every day, but accessed the BB site much less frequently, if at all. They used their phones as the main means of communication with tutor and other trainees, but rarely, if ever, did this through BB. They found their phones easier and more convenient to use, commenting that BB was cumbersome, old style and hard to find information on. They also commented that BB was temporary and the site would disappear when they finished their course. They found Dropbox© easier to use for sharing resources.

Focus Group Data

The focus group showed that all preferred the phone to BB and used it as a reminder to access email as well as to access email. As with the questionnaire data, they commented that they were more inclined to share via Dropbox© - especially as BB was temporary, that is, not available on completion of their course. Time was a barrier when it came to using the VLE, which tended to be at the bottom of their 'to do' list. The participants also came up with some solutions to avoid the non-use of the VLE in future, including, using Dropbox© from the start, and encouraging trainees to share from the start of the course.

However, the data also revealed some contradictions, as the respondents said that this preference for the phone was not about choosing the phone over BB (as per the questionnaire data) it was more that it was a convenient reminder to access email. Some also commented that they are not allowed to use their phone in school as there are different policies on this so this preference did not always apply.

The data showed that the mobile technology provided a more convenient and accessible means to gain the information they needed, because they could access course information when they wanted, rather than having to find a PC or laptop from which to log onto the VLE.

Conclusions

The research has shown that it is possible to replace the functions of the VLE with mobile technology for busy trainee teachers who find it easier to access information and communicate with each other and their tutor using their phones. It does however, raise questions about the time, money and effort universities (and their tutors) put into creating VLE sites for students to use, only to find that they are largely ignored. Improvements to mobile applications that run from institutional VLEs are improving all the time, and we may need to consider these as a means of communication with students rather than more traditional sites. We might also need to consider allowing ex-students access to their sites for some time after they have completed their course in order to encourage sharing on such sites. Having spent money on VLEs, can we afford to ignore them and move towards using the phones and cloud technology? But if we don't, will our students leave us behind?

References

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