WHAT'S HAPPENING IN 'THEIR SPACE'? EXPLORING THE BORDERS OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING WITH UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS OF EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES

Introduction

In this paper we explore the symposium themes of innovation, creativity and sustainability in relation to mobile learning using data generated in a small scale research study of undergraduate students of education in a UK university. We were inspired to investigate how two groups of undergraduate students engaged with their own mobile devices in spontaneous ways during their time studying at university by the Demos report (Green & Hannon, 2007) which alerted us to the existence of 'their space' or virtual environments, and associated practices, which were not well understood by adults (whether parents or teachers). Our goal was to find out what was happening when this generation of young people embarked on their university education and we sought to reflect on the implications for conceptualisations and practices of learning and teaching in higher education.

In particular, we seek use our data to reflect on the implications for resourcing and designing effective learning environments for higher education given the skills, preferences and resources which undergraduate students may bring with them. To achieve this, we provide analyses of examples of students' spontaneous uses of their mobile devices in order to investigate which affordances of the technology (Cook, Pachler, Bachmair, 2011) they are exploiting. The analyses of spontaneous learning practices will inform our discussion of if and how creative and innovative approaches to learning are being facilitated by mobile technologies.

The sample of students in our study consists of two distinct groups of education students, namely i) those studying on an initial teaching training programme leading to Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) enabling them to practise as primary school teachers on graduation and ii) those studying on an academically-oriented programme of study exploring theoretical aspects of education who tend to work in education-related professions on graduation e.g. museum education. We argue that this sample of future teachers and education professionals are a valuable group to study in order for us to gain insights into likely issues and challenges relating to uses of mobile technologies in learning in schools. Gee & Hayes (2011) propose that there is a crisis in schooling in developed countries (e.g. concerns about children's literacy achievements) and that new forms of digital media offer the possibility of a paradigm change in schooling. Facer (2012) in addition states that schools need to respond to technological advances to support learners' development as both 'informal educators' and participants in 'networked publics'. Clearly ongoing research is needed in order to explore what the opportunities and pitfalls might be for a new model of schooling which fully embraces the affordances of mobile technologies.

By focusing on future teachers and education professionals we can reflect on questions of sustainability and mobile technologies. An exploration of the current learning behaviours of these future professionals and their orientations towards mobile technologies could indicate the extent to which support for teachers to incorporate mobile technologies in their practice is likely to be necessary or whether it will be second nature to them. As such, our study forefronts the people, albeit a small sample of 68 individuals, rather than the technologies themselves, in keeping with the approach followed in Green & Hannon (2007:16).

Our study allows us to contribute to the third symposium trend identified as "the boundaries of learning that the 'm' in m-learning forces us to explore". Our data set (further explained in 2.) consists of students' self-reports of their spontaneous uses of their own mobile technologies captured in a range of modes (oral, written, collaboratively- and individually-constructed). The boundaries of learning between e.g. formal instructional contexts and informal, spontaneous, individually-guided contexts are at the heart of our study. The continuum of learning delineated by Cook, Pachler & Bradley (2008) is clearly a valuable, informing concept in the work presented here as is a focus upon 'space' within research into m-learning as explored by e.g. Sølvberg & Rismark (2012).

The Study

The sample for the study consisted of 68 students across two programmes (50 from BA (Hons) Education Studies and 18 from BA (Hons) Primary Initial Teacher Education). The study was designed as a qualitative study with the goal of generating students' self reports of their processes of responding to learning activities set by the researchers, who were also the students' tutors. Hence, the data generation was designed to sit within timetabled seminars and methods used sought to mirror the kinds of learning activity that would typically be used in seminars. Gee & Hayes (2011) emphasise the importance of oral language in digital communications and taking this on board, we captured students' self-reports in a modes reflecting those present in digital media (ie individual, collaborative, oral, visual, written).

Given the dual role of the researchers as the participant-students' tutors, particular attention was given to gaining informed consent and to adhering to ethical principles for educational research. The study was designed in accordance with the British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines (2012). Additional attention was given to the particularities of researching m-learning which have been problematised valuably by Wishart (2013).

Responding to Lankshear & Knobel's (2007: 231) call for research into web 2.0 practices to either 'try on' or develop new theories in order to analyse phenomena under investigation more effectively, we adopt a theoretical perspective frequently characterised as post-qualitative and encountered by us within the field of early childhood studies research, that is, rhizomatic analysis (Deleuze & Guattari 1988). The metaphor of the rhizome, taken from botany and studies of the growth of roots such as ginger, encourages researchers to explore connections between ideas or practices that may not take a linear, sequential form. A reason for studying our data through a rhizomatic lens was that we hoped to be able to trace the literacy and learning practices of the students as supported by their mobile technologies, without imposing a presumption that this would be a linear process for the participants.

Our contribution to the symposium therefore consists of analyses of the self-reports of undergraduate students of education and their engagement with their own mobile devices in their learning. Additionally, we bring our theoretical, ethical and methodological reflections on our research processes to the discussion table and welcome engagement with colleagues.

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