Case Study – Foundation Art and Design
Learner-generated contexts – mobile for anytime anywhere learning

CONTACT

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CONTEXT

The Foundation Art and Design course is where students really find their feet as artists and designers. It covers a wide range of tools and techniques, allowing students to identify their own areas of specialism and develop their own style. The majority of learning on this course does not take place in traditional classrooms or lecture theatres. Students do much of their work in studio spaces, but can find their inspiration anywhere from town centre to countryside. The teaching on this course always needs to find a balance between allowing the students freedom to experiment, and providing guidance and constructive feedback to keep them on track.

We wanted to find a way to support students in creating their own contexts for learning, so that (unlike traditional teaching methods) the student could choose the time and place, but still have access to all the resources they needed. Research on mobile learning identifies these resources as cognitive (prior knowledge and learning), social (discussion with tutors and peers), physical (artifacts or resources) and virtual (the VLE and the wider web). Mobile technology seemed to offer a way to provide access to most of these resources. As well as supporting anytime anywhere learning, we wanted to ensure that we encouraged the students to document the development of their work. Many students work in ephemeral media,

such as ice, and so the artwork only exists for a limited period of time. Documentation is therefore a vitally important part of the course, as students need to be able to evidence each stage of their work as well as reflecting on their choices and progression. As smartphones now include relatively high quality cameras, it seemed that mobile could help us here too.
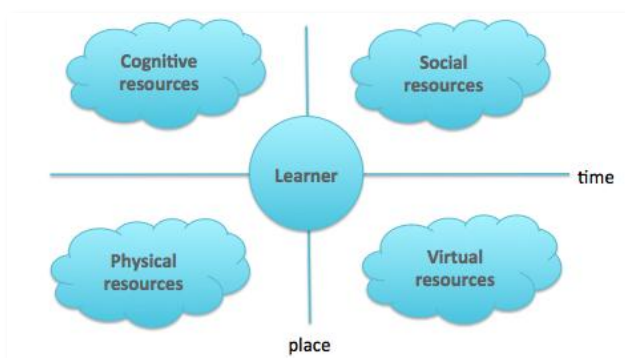
INTENDED OUTCOMES

- To enable students to document and reflect on their work quickly, easily and in situ
- To support guided independent learning by connecting the student with social and virtual resources from any location

THE PROCESS

The pilot ran through Stage 2 of the Foundation course (Nov 2011 – Feb 2012). First we set up a Journal in the NILE site for the course. This created an online space that was private to each student on the course, where they could post images and comments about their work in progress, and get personalised feedback from their tutor. The Journal tool is easily accessible through the mobile app, so students could upload their ideas straight from their mobile devices.

Next we asked for volunteers to take part in the mobile pilot. We recognised the continued importance of physical portfolios for some types of work, so the online version was optional.

24 students volunteered to take part. Of these, 16 had their own smartphones, and 8 borrowed iPod Touchs from the Learning Technology team. All students were given a short handout explaining how to post to the journal.
We evaluated the pilot using an online survey and a series of short video interviews.

THE BENEFITS & CHALLENGES

Participation in the online journal was mixed. The students posted an average of six times over the second stage of the Foundation course; some students did not post at all, and some students seemed to really take to the new medium. One student posted 25 times over this period.
Benefits: 92% of the students who used it said they found the journal tool easy or very easy to use on a mobile device, and there were no support or training queries. They commented that the convenience and immediacy of having the device to hand had helped them to document more than they would otherwise have done, and that it also encouraged them to share their work spontaneously with their peers, through social media. Students also told us that they preferred looking back through past work on the mobile device, rather than "hauling out huge sketchbooks".

A number of students also said that they found getting online feedback on their mobile device really helpful, particularly over the Christmas break while they are away from the campus. They noted that it helped them use the time more effectively, to progress their work rather than going "off track". In these ways mobile technology certainly seemed to address the intended outcomes of the pilot.

"It was really useful to not have to 'lose the moment' in the long and drawn-out process of looking for a camera then going to the library to find a computer to then upload the image..."

Challenges: The main challenge for the pilot was connectivity. We had to improve the wireless coverage in the studio spaces on campus, to make the mobile use as seamless as possible. Students working off site on smartphones were happy to use their own 3G connection, but this was not possible for those borrowing a (wireless only) iPod Touch.

For more on what the students thought of the project, have a look at the video: http://bit.ly/uonmobileart

KEY POINTS

- Easy (for staff and students)
- Flexibility – allowed students to work wherever they needed to
- Inclusion. Not all students may have compatible devices. Check you have enough for those that don't.

REFERENCES

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