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Improving Cross-Cultural Awareness and Communication through Mobile Technologies

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, technology is mediating the way in which the youth around the world communicate, consume content and create meaning. As mobile communication media and the internet become more pervasive, young people from different cultures and communities are afforded more opportunities for collaboration across previously unbridgeable distances. The need for cross-cultural awareness and communication is thus more important than ever. The initiative described in this article, successfully demonstrated the role of mobile phones and the web as mediating technologies in the development of intercultural competencies and communication skills among a group of teenagers scattered across two countries.[Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]

Keywords: Digital Media; Intercultural Communication; Intercultural Competencies; Mobile Storytelling; Online Collaboration

BACKGROUND

From August to December 2007, ten teenagers aged 12 to 14 were invited to document culturally relevant aspects of their lives and communities and publish the material online. They were also encouraged to engage with one another about the published content. The participants, five teenagers from the United States of America (USA), and five from South Africa (SA), represented diverse

backgrounds and came from very different realities. The participants had smart phones at their disposal to document the world through their eyes. The stories they captured were published online as digital artefacts accessible to all of the participating members of the project. One of the aims of the project was to see if the mobile stories created would reflect these diverse perspectives and ultimately lead to increased cross-cultural awareness among the participants.

The initiative as proof of concept, described in this article, successfully demonstrated the role of mobile phones and the web as mediating technologies in the development of intercultural competencies and communication skills among a group of teenagers, scattered across two countries. Efforts were coordinated by researchers at Stanford University (USA) and MobiLED initiative at the Meraka Institute, Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (SA).

THEORY

Increasingly, technology is mediating the way in which the youth around the world communicate, consume and create content. Central to the lives of many teenagers in the USA is the use of social media such as blogs and social networking sites. According to a Pew Internet study, 93% of USA teens aged 12-17 use the internet and they are treating it as a venue for social interaction – a place where they can share creations, tell stories, and interact with others (Lenhart, Madden, Macgill, & Smith, 2007). The study revealed that 39% of online teens also share their own artistic creations, such as artwork, photos, stories or videos; 28% have created their own blog; and 55% have created a profile on a social networking site such as MySpace or Facebook.

The national school study Speak Up 2007 revealed that over half (52%) of learners in grades 6-8 and two-thirds (67%) of those in grades 9-12 had access to a mobile phone("Project Tomorrow: "Speak Up" 2007 National Findings", 2008). The study concluded that amongst school learners in the USA, access to mobile devices (mobile phones, MP3 players, personal digital assistants and smart phones) has dramatically increased in the last year. Learners were apparently very interested in making better use of these devices for learning and particularly to assist with communications, collaborations, creativity and productivity.

The same depth of figures does not exist for SA. What is known is that in 2006 the number of all internet users (not just teenagers) was around 10.8% ("Telecommunication/ICT markets and trends in Africa." 2007). While access to computers is relatively low, 68% of the population had access to a mobile phone in 2006 (Gilwald, 2007). A very popular mobile instant messaging (MIM) service used by many young people in SA is called MXit. Currently there are over 6.5 million MXit sub-

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