Chapter 17
Empowered Learner Identity through M-Learning: Representations of Disenfranchised Students’ Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

E-learning has been promoted as a key component of improving educational access and opportunity internationally, but for disenfranchised learners, many forms of e-learning are just as alien as the educational systems they have rejected. M-learning utilises technologies, activities and social systems that are integrated into many people’s lives, including those who have had limited access to, or rejected, formal education systems. This paper discusses projects conducted in Northern Australia that explored a range of e-tools to support indigenous students’ engagement and recognition of their knowledge and contexts. Mobile learning tools emerged as the preferred way to learn throughout the project. This approach challenges educational institutions to connect to students’ lives and contexts. This paper shows how participants utilised m-learning to demonstrate their diverse knowledge systems, the decisions they made about representing knowledge through m-learning, and the implications for trainers and assessors.

INTRODUCTION

E-learning ... offers the opportunities for different modes of interaction involving many more people from diverse cultural backgrounds. This involves a new set of literacies (Bowles, 2001, p. 102) and relationships with learning and technologies. Approaches to learning that build on strong relationships with technologies increasingly utilise mobile technologies, and these mobile learning tools have been taken up by many disenfranchised learners and are located in their own contexts. An exploration of a project conducted with Indigenous learners in remote Northern Australian commu-
nities found that m-learning was a powerful tool in recognising knowledge and building people’s confidence in themselves as learners. For many learners, m-learning has the potential to include a range of people previously disenfranchised from the education system as their ways of knowledge structures are not reflected in the mainstream system and lack of access to appropriate infrastructure is not recognised. This paper reports on an m-learning based approach that involved Indigenous people in the development of ways of learning that recognize learners’ knowledge and skills, as well as the co-production of knowledge that address the skill and qualification gaps that need to be overcome to gain successful employment outcomes. This paper explores the constructs of mobile learning utilised and reflects on the outcomes of the project as a form of social learning that engages learners and their worlds.

Context

The role of e-learning in a knowledge economy is recognised in the European Union’s approaches to lifelong “e-learning that use e-learning for promoting digital literacy and thereby contribute to strengthening social cohesion and personal development and fostering intercultural dialogue” (European Union, 2003).

In Australia, the intergovernmental Council of Australian Governments (2009) has established the need for a flexible vocational education system to increase access for, and engagement of, Indigenous people, and provide them with opportunities for engaging in the workforce through the Closing the Gap strategy. Within this agenda, “e-learning is not an end in itself but a means to the greater flexibility, responsiveness and long-term sustainability now required of the national training system” (Allen Consulting, 2010, p. 15). The potential of e-learning to improve educational and employment outcomes has been adopted in Australia and particularly by Indigenous learners ready for a positive learning experience in the formal education system. The use of e-learning is, however, not unproblematic as there is differential access to computers and other technologies, Internet access, regular power supplies and appropriate materials.

Boyle and Wallace (2008) note that integrated e-learning developed with Indigenous people is more than understanding the technological or ICT resources but addressing organisational, systemic, pedagogic and cultural issues that challenge policy, educational institutions and systems, educators and educational brokers… (There is a) need to work with educational policy, institutions, trainers and brokers to re-imagine VET (Vocational Education and Training) in Indigenous contexts and then, together consider a new way to structure, fund and support remote Indigenous peoples’ learning through e-learning.

As Christie (2004) notes, Aboriginal people have demonstrated a strong interest in communication through electronic media but the representations of Aboriginal people and knowledge need to be inclusive and avoid commodification and marginalisation of Aboriginal understandings and intent. Any examination of the potential of e-learning in improving educational and workforce outcomes of Indigenous learners, then, needs to consider the ways technologies and representations are flexible and inclusive of different ways of knowing and being represented in educational, workforce and local communities.

M-learning has been a key component of approaches that explore the potential of digital technologies to negotiate meaningful education and workforce development experiences. Mobile devices are characterised by the potential for making connection through spontaneous collaboration and communication, location focused information, being readily available, i.e., within sight, beaming information between devices and providing portable means of collecting and sharing audio and visual information (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005). Mobile devices provide opportunities for a wider group of people to create and share new
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