

Chapter 9

Unleashing the Potential of Mobile Learning through SMS Text for Open and Distance Learners

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia has a population of about 28 million people but there are, incredibly, more than 30 million mobile phone subscriptions. Sixth in the world in terms of SMS (Short Message Service) volume, Malaysians appear to be addictive SMS texters. With over 98 percent of its students having mobile phones and 82 percent of the students ready for learning through mobile phones, Open University Malaysia initiated a project that first experimented with podcasts and SMS texts later. This chapter describes how the institution conceptualized, planned, and created a mobile learning environment using SMS to enhance its current blended learning model in general, and in particular, one of its courses with over 1,000 students enrolled. The chapter also describes the categories used for formulating the SMS content, use of Twitter and Facebook to support the SMS sent and discusses the feedback received on the initiative as well as the issues and challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Open University Malaysia (OUM) was established in August 2000 to provide opportunities to

its working adult population who wish to obtain tertiary qualifications. As an institution, it seeks to become a leader in providing flexible education and believes that opportunities should be provided to all, regardless of time, location, or one's age or socioeconomic status. OUM enrolled its first batch

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of 753 students in 2001. Established in response to the government's call to democratise education and to provide opportunities to working adults in particular without having to leave the workforce or study away from the family, the institution aims to widen access to education by leveraging on technology, adopting flexible modes of learning, and at the same time provide a stimulating environment to engage learners during the learning process. Having enrolled almost 100,000 94,000 learners in 61 learning centres throughout the country since its first intake of students in 2001, OUM seeks to put learning in the hands of its learners through mobile learning. It is believed that mobile learning will increase the flexibility of learning support in terms of approaches used to engage learners during their learning process. It has previously introduced various learning technologies from the most basic print learning resource in the form of modules for all its courses to the more sophisticated form of learning material such as multimedia courseware, learning objects, video streamed tutorials and podcasts (MP3 and MP4 formats), depending on the suitability of the need for selected courses.

In 2008 OUM decided that it was time to seriously explore the use of mobile technologies to enhance its blended learning model. Following the decision, the Institute of Quality, Research and Innovation (IQRI) was entrusted to lead and explore how mobile learning can be implemented. IQRI formed a mobile learning team to research on various uses of mobile technologies and how these could be used to enhance its current blend of learning approaches comprising: self-managed learning, online learning and face-to-face interaction. To ensure acceptability, the team distributed a survey to 3,000 students in all its learning centres throughout the country. The objective was to determine students' receptiveness and readiness to mobile learning. Through the survey, it was found that 98 percent of OUM learners have at least one mobile phone each while close to 82 percent stated that they would be ready for mobile

learning when implemented within six to twelve months (Abas, Chng & Mansor, 2009). Generally, the survey generated a positive response from the 2,837 students who responded. It was, to say the least, encouraging.

The objective of the chapter is to share OUM's mobile learning initiative, specifically, on how a very common device, the mobile phone, and how a tremendously popular form of communication, the SMS text; was successfully used to engage distance learners during their learning process and hence, enhance their learning. It is, potentially, a tool that may support ubiquitous learning.

BACKGROUND

If one were to look at data on mobile phone subscriptions world-wide, the landscape could be described as spiky with the tallest peaks located in Taiwan, Luxembourg, Hong Kong, Italy and Iceland (International Telecommunication Union as cited in Nationmaster.com (2010). In an article published online entitled "The World is Spiky", Richard Florida the guru of the Creative Class pointed out that when the world is portrayed through three-dimensional graphs for aspects such as population, light emissions, number of patents and scientific citation, it appears spiky with sharp, tall peaks, hills and valleys. As for mobile cellular subscriptions by region, there has been a phenomenal increase for all regions across the world. In 2008, for example, mobile penetration in Europe reached 118 percent. This was followed by the Commonwealth of Independent States (113%), Americas (82%), Arab States (63%), Asia Pacific (46%) and Africa (32%) as compared to the world's mobile penetration (for 2008) average rate of 60 percent (International Communication Union, 2010).

The penetration rate for mobile phones in Malaysia was of a similar trend. From 21.8 percent in 2000, the penetration rate had increased to 74.1 percent in 2005 and then on to an amazing 106.2

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