

Chapter 7

The Mobile Learning Network: Getting Serious about Games Technologies for Learning

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ABSTRACT

The Mobile Learning Network currently in its third year, is a unique collaborative initiative encouraging and enabling the introduction of mobile learning in English post-14 education. The programme, funded jointly by the Learning and Skills Council and participating colleges and schools and supported by LSN has involved nearly 40,000 learners and over 7,000 staff. MoLeNET projects have procured a range of handheld devices and supporting technologies since the initiative began in 2007, with a significant increase in purchases of games technologies (mainly the Nintendo DS and Sony PSP, but also the Nintendo Wii) observed in the second year of the programme. Colleges and schools across England have exploited both the gaming potential of these devices for teaching and learning and the numerous opportunities afforded by their impressive additional functionality. This paper explores the key findings from the MoLeNET research and evaluation strand in relation to mobile games technologies and games based learning and the contribution of these to improvements in teaching practice and learning experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

MoLeNET

During the three years 2007 to 2010 The Learning and Skills Council (LSC, now the Skills Funding Agency, <http://www.skillsfundingagency.com>) and participating schools and colleges across England invested more than £16 million to support the implementation and embedding of mobile teaching and learning in Secondary and Further Education under the the Mobile Learning Network (MoLeNET) initiative (<http://www.molenet.org.uk>) . Participating organisations purchased a diverse range of mobile technologies, including smartphones, small netbooks, digital cameras, MP3/4 players, handheld voting systems, and mobile games devices (Nintendo DS and Sony PSP). They have also invested in improving the infrastructure that supports users of mobile technologies, i.e., wireless networks and servers, and ensures sustainability of new approaches to technology supported learning. A small number of institutions have also purchased Nintendo Wii games consoles. Colleges involved have either worked alone or as partners in consortia including other colleges and/or schools, specialist colleges or work-based learning providers. Technical and pedagogical advice and mentoring, on-line systems for sharing knowledge and resources and research and evaluation training and support have been provided by the LSN MoLeNET Support and Evaluation Programme. 147 colleges and 37 schools have taken part in MoLeNET benefitting approximately 40,000 learners and 7000 teaching staff.

Further information about MoLeNET and the MoLeNET projects can be found at www.molenet.org.uk. MoLeNET years one and two research findings together with further information about the impact of MoLeNET and lessons learned have been published by LSN (Attewell, Savill-Smith,

& Douch, 2009; Attewell, Savill-Smith, Douch, & Parker, 2010).

MoLeNET Research and Evaluation

Research and evaluation has always been a key strand of the MoLeNET Programme, which aimed:

- To investigate how colleges and schools use mobile technologies to support teaching and learning.
- To evaluate the impact of mobile teaching and learning on learners, teachers and institutions.
- To assess the impact of mobile teaching and learning on learner retention, achievement and progression.
- To encourage practitioner reflective practice, culture change and practice improvement through practitioner-led action research.

MoLeNET research activity has been collaborative, involving both practitioner researchers, trained and supported by LSN, and LSN researchers responsible for synthesis and evaluation, collection and analysis of additional data including individual learner record (ILR) data related to learner retention, achievement and progression. It was felt that practitioner-led research as well as LSN research was an effective strategy for two main reasons:

1. MoLeNET involves a large number of teachers and learners working in diverse contexts, using different technologies in different ways to address specific and appropriate aims, within a variety of subjects and levels, both in the College and remotely. Therefore it seemed both appropriate and practical that individual practitioners within the colleges and schools would lead local research with LSN support.

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