

Chapter 9

The Pedagogical Suitability of Using Cell Phones to Support Distance Education Students

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ABSTRACT

The use of mobile technologies in education has had a major impact on the pedagogy as known and understood by many academics in Open Distance Learning (ODL) institutions. The aim of this chapter is to investigate the pedagogic approaches that best support effective use of cell phones in the distance education context. This is done through highlighting some of the theories of learning and analysing how they can be used to enhance social interaction to support distance learners. Social interaction is used as a conceptual framework to explore the pedagogy that can be supported by 'MXit'—a cell phone instant messaging system. The idea is to utilise devices that students already use in their informal learning social context to develop formal learning opportunities and support mechanisms for distance education students.

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, distance education researchers have been looking at different technologies that can be used to enhance communication, thereby addressing the challenge of isolation which has been associated with correspondence education.

The aim was to find the best possible means to provide support for students who are isolated from their teachers and their peers. The effects of such isolation can inhibit, if not prevent entirely, any possibility for distance learners to engage in a meaningful way with their study material, teachers, and peers. Vygotsky (1930/1978) argues that

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students' development is determined by social interaction through problem solving under the guidance of a teacher or in collaboration with capable peers. Mobile technologies, such as cell phones, hold considerable promise for distance education as a cognitive delivery tool to enhance collaborative learning while addressing the challenge of student isolation.

The potential for using cell phones for educational purposes is enormous in a country of limited access to infrastructure that supports telephones, computers and broadband capacity for easy connectivity. In addition, few people have expertise of using computers. In the past ten years, cell phone users in Africa have increased to over 600 million, second only to Asia, (Reed 2011). In South Africa alone, the cell phone penetration is estimated at 98 percent. More than 90 per cent of University of South Africa (UNISA) students own or have access to a cell phone. Most of the cell phones they own have software features such as the internet, instant messaging platforms, pictures, video, music and games. Even the low-cost cell phones have some of these features that enable them to be used in education for collaboration, tutoring, research, reading and writing purposes (Prensky, 2004). The latest top of the range cell phones have the computing power of the mid-1990s computers while consuming one-hundredth of the energy (Prensky, 2004). Its mobility allows students to learn anytime, anywhere and everywhere.

Keegan (2005, p. 3) argues that 'it is not technologies with inherent pedagogical qualities that are successful in distance education, but technologies that are generally available to citizens'. Since cell phones are used widely by a majority of distance education students, their use in teaching and learning is even more appropriate in a distance education context because they have the potential to reduce the formality of learning experiences that is not tied to a particular physical location. What this means in the South African context is that distance education students who live in remote rural areas can use cell phones to

communicate with their lecturers and seek help from their peers. The efficacy of distance education in promoting access to marginalised students is premised on the notion that it can accommodate an increased and more diverse student population at reduced costs.

The challenge for UNISA, as the oldest and the largest distance education institution in Africa, is to come up with innovative ways of supporting distance education students. Studies have shown that proper provision of student support services that are meant to enhance social interaction may break learners' isolation and meet not only the academic demands of students in distance education but also their social needs (Brindley & Paul, 2004; Tait, 2003; Thorpe, 2001). Learning is most successful when people interact with each other through interrogating and sharing their description of the world (Sharples, 2002). The incorporation of mobile technologies, such as cell phones, in education can address this need because they can enable interaction between a student and stakeholders.

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the pedagogic approach that best supports effective use of mobile learning devices in the distance education context. This will be done through highlighting some of the theories of learning and analysing how they can be used to enhance social interaction to support distance learners. The role of social interaction in the process of learning cannot be underestimated. Vygotsky (1930/1978) argues that social interactions are methodologies that turn experience into knowledge, with language as a medium for negotiation of teaching and learning. Therefore, social interaction will be used as a conceptual framework to explore the potential for using MXit—a cell phone instant messaging system—to support and enhance learning for distance education students. MXit, a social network independent platform that was developed in Stellenbosch, South Africa is popular amongst younger distance learners because it is cheaper to use. It costs about two cents for every

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