Cell phones as an instrument for student support. The case of the University of Pretoria

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Mobile phones and computers

Appropriate technology

IS EMAIL NOW ONLY FOR “OLD PEOPLE”?

"College officials around the country find that a growing number of students are missing important messages about deadlines, class cancellations, and events sent to them by e-mail because, well, the messages are sent to them by e-mail."

The article cites research reported in a 2005 Pew Internet & American Life Project called "Teens and Technology," which found that while college students still used email to communicate with their professors, they preferred to use instant messaging, text messaging, and services such as MySpace to interact with their peers.

ICT profile in the World

- Internet usage
  - North America (68.1%)
  - Europe (35.9%)
  - Africa (2.5%)
- Growth rate
  - Africa 403.7%
  - Europe 176.1%
  - North America 108.9%
- Digital divide
  - Africa has fewer Internet users than France alone

Reality in Africa

Why the fuss about mobile phones?

- Why on earth would you bother with text messaging?
- If the mobile phone is the only "tool" you have for communication, your mind-set regarding the importance, role and how you use it will be different.
- Africa is the ideal place to fully exploit the possibilities that mobile phones offer us in supporting our learners.
- In Africa the appropriate technology to optimise in full.

| TECHNOLOGY PROFILE: Distance Education Students University of Pretoria |
|----------------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Enrollment Cycle                |                |                |                |
|                                 | 2002           | 2004           | 2006           |
|                                 | (Total = 1665) | (Total = 3187) | (Total = 5083) |
| Total                           | %              | Total          | Total          |
| Cell Phone                      | 1485 88.9%    | 3728 98%      | 5604 99%      |
| Fax                             | 0 0.0%        | 252 8%        | 687 14%       |
| E-mail                          | 4 0.2%        | 23 1%         | 419 8%        |
| Internet access                 | 0 0.0%        | 12 0%         | 115 2%        |
Views on mobile phones that limit our creativity
• The mobile phone is only a telephone
• Text messaging is predominantly used by the youth
• Think that 160 characters is the full potential of SMSs
• The mobile phone is not an instrument for learning
• Are themselves ‘illiterate’ in the use of text messaging
• Always talk about the size of the screen

Purpose of student support
• To make students successful in their studies
• Student support do have many faces – whatever we do to make our students more successful
• Cell Phones is just one of many instruments that is appropriate for our students

Possibilities of the cell phone

Academic SMS Support
• Academic – instructional
• Quiz – interactive
• Student questions – interactive
• IVR – mini-lectures
• Lecturer response – instructional

Administrative SMS Support
Future developments

- Websites
- Memory cards
- Interactive Video Tutorials
- TV broadcasts
- Radio streaming

SMSs can do the following

- Direct students to important pages in the study guide
- Create the impression that the University is supporting them with their learning
- Create a perception that the lecturer is “closer” than the distance between the learner and lecturer
- Give the student the opportunity to ask academic questions via SMSs and get a response
- Listen to the lecturer giving a “mini-lecture” on a difficult concept
- Motivating the student to work diligently
- Help students to structure their studies
- Make them feel they are not alone in their studies

Research

- There is a pressing need
- Traditional research methods
- Four major groups:
  1. Attitudes of students towards m/e-learning
  2. Educational applications on the mobile phone
  3. Uses of the mobile phone for educational purposes
  4. Design guidelines and model specifications for educational development on the mobile phone
- It seemed extraordinary that a technology that has clearly taken the world by storm had attracted so little rigorous research

SMS Research in 2006

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How do you feel when you get an SMS message from UP?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At ease</td>
<td>696</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other not stated here</td>
<td>295</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worried</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irritated</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of questionnaires</td>
<td>3121</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reasons you would most like to SMS UP</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic matters</td>
<td>1125</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative matters</td>
<td>1996</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of questionnaires</td>
<td>3121</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason you like getting SMSs from UP</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>They make you feel closer to UP</td>
<td>2376</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMSs help you to meet deadlines in our study programme</td>
<td>2342</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They make you more motivated to study</td>
<td>2280</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They help you to understand your academic programme better</td>
<td>1924</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>They help you to improve your marks in your studies</td>
<td>1279</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other reasons not mentioned here</td>
<td>669</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number of questionnaires</td>
<td>3121</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Do you ever delete SMS message from UP without reading them?
- Yes: 2943 (87%)
- No: 111 (4%)
- No answer: 67 (2%)

How would you prefer to register for exams and contact sessions
- Fax: 154 (5%)
- SMS: 119 (4%)
- No answer: 1428 (49%)

Conclusion

- Mobile phones will not solve the ICT challenge in Africa, but with creative and innovative developments, the mobile phone will play an instrumental role in the learning environment in Africa.
- Africa is in a position to become the leader in this field because this technology is available, accessible and affordable for Africans.
- Integrating the great potential of mobile phones with the learning environment makes good common sense.

Thank you!

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