



Reflections: Two Mobile Learning Strategies under One Organization (Institutional vs. Local)

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions in Australia are mostly using Blackboard Inc as a learning management system (LMS). As trends follow from one university to the next, most universities today are enabling an out-of-the-box mobile solution called Blackboard Mobile Learn (BBML) to activate their mobile learning strategy. This paper represents the researcher's own reflection on dealing with two similar mobile learning strategies at the same institution (the organization level vs. the local school or faculty level). The recommendations outlined focus on the ease of uptake by the end users (students); design challenges for staff; and simplified transparent strategies for mobile learning roll-outs.

Keywords

mLearning, Business School, Blackboard, Blackboard Mobile Learn, BBML

INTRODUCTION

In the past Mobile Learning (mLearning) often sounded a complex and expensive process to establish, however today the usage of an enterprise application such as Blackboard Learning Management System (LMS) integrated with the new system extension Blackboard Mobile Learn (BBML) equates to an easier and much more affordable strategy for any educational institution to implement as an out-of-the box mobile solution. This process complements the existing IT infrastructure and the support needed for both student and teaching staff alike. Student demands and expectations for mobile accessibility to course materials at their fingertips (anywhere and anytime) are clearly evident from the two latest implementations of mobile learning strategies at the University of Sydney main campus and locally at the Business School.

WHY MOBILE LEARN?

Martin (2011) described the third screen (the mobile device) as a revolutionary movement of the 20th century, moving away from TV firstly to Desktop computers, and now to Mobile devices such as smart phones and tablets. Martin also outlined the need for "Constant Content" and the change of the end users' behavior that connects to online information using a mobile phone 24/7; "Mobile content consumption is continuous. There is no beginning, middle, or end" (Martin 2011). The expectation from school leavers who are used to using console and networked games from their own living rooms is that they need the same speed, connectivity, and security of access as well to campus / course information (such as online course information, grades, discussion board, wikis, lecture recordings and the like). This poses many critical questions such as a) is the organization ready for mobile learn? b) is there enough student demand for mobile learn? c) above all, are the teaching and support staff equipped with skills needed to re-develop constant content creation?

Based on those questions and in order to improve students' engagement and participation, the Business School linked the third, mobile screen to the existing Blackboard LMS as a natural progression towards offering mobile learning. The school's main strategy was to enhance the experience of learning and teaching through the use of technology by complementing rather than just replacing *What's already working*:

Generally speaking, mobile technology can be used in class for exercises or outside the classroom for ease-of-access or flipped classroom models. (eLearning, OLT, 2012)

Outlined are some of the examples of how the mobile learn strategy at the Business School level is being used to enhance the learning between students and peers:

- Students respond or post comments to discussions boards; blog posts; Wikis and online journal entries easily using a smart phone
- Students' uploading of photos; videos; sounds files and hyperlinks to discussions boards; blog posts; Wikis and online journal entries
- Students' checking of announcements; online grades for submitted assessments; online quizzes and presentations
- More opportunities for Business School students to interact with one another by participating in mobile experiential activities.

Demand

Student access to Blackboard through a mobile device was high and successful from day 3 of its release on 3rd of September 2012. The majority of users used an iPhone with almost 444 unique weekly visitors climbing to 1199 unique weekly visitors by day 40 as of 22/10/2012 (see figure 1).



Figure 1. Mobile Learn Analytics (day 40)

Unique Users by Platform

The smart handheld devices that are supported by Blackboard Mobile Learn are iPhone, iPad Touch, iPad, Android, Blackberry and WebOS. Most staff and students accessing Blackboard Mobile Learn were using the IOS (Apple) phone (1550 clicks); then Android (328 clicks) and only 24 users with Blackberry phones (see figure 2). It is clear that any future course development and testing will need to be thoroughly done on Apple devices as a priority.

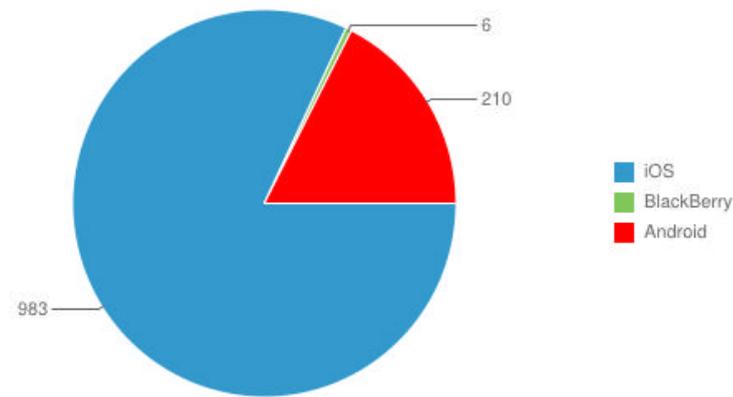


Figure 2. Unique Users by Platform

When's a Goof Day?

The highest period recorded by student logins using a mobile device was Monday; then each of the days of the week ranging between Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday had an average of 700 user logins (see figure 3); whilst that figure drops slightly on Friday and the lowest recorded was Saturday. Interpretation of such data suggests that any submission of assessments and high level activities such as online home quizzes should be avoided on weekends mainly due to the fact that a) students are not interested in logging in during the weekend (especially Saturdays) b) support hours from e-learning support teams or IT helpdesks are only available during working hours from Monday to Friday (8:00am-6:00pm).

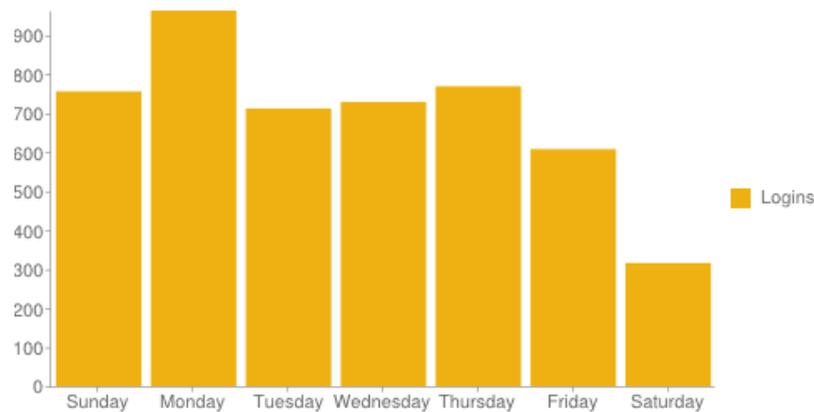


Figure 3. Login by Day the Week

CHALLENGES

As the Business School hosts its own Blackboard system and now Mobile Learn, the University has another Blackboard system with its own rolled out Mobile Learn and app for the rest of the university community to use. This has caused many challenges and confusion for end users at all levels.

User Experiences

Having too many mobile strategies co-existing between the Organization vs. Local levels (University vs. School levels) could be easily resolved to ensure the user experience is not tarnished with technical issues and political arguments within the organization. Simple integration of both Mobile Learn implementations into one cohesive system would be a way forward. The existence of two names appearing in the “results” when searching the app “University of Sydney” and “University of Sydney Business School” (see figure 4) has confused the majority of students.

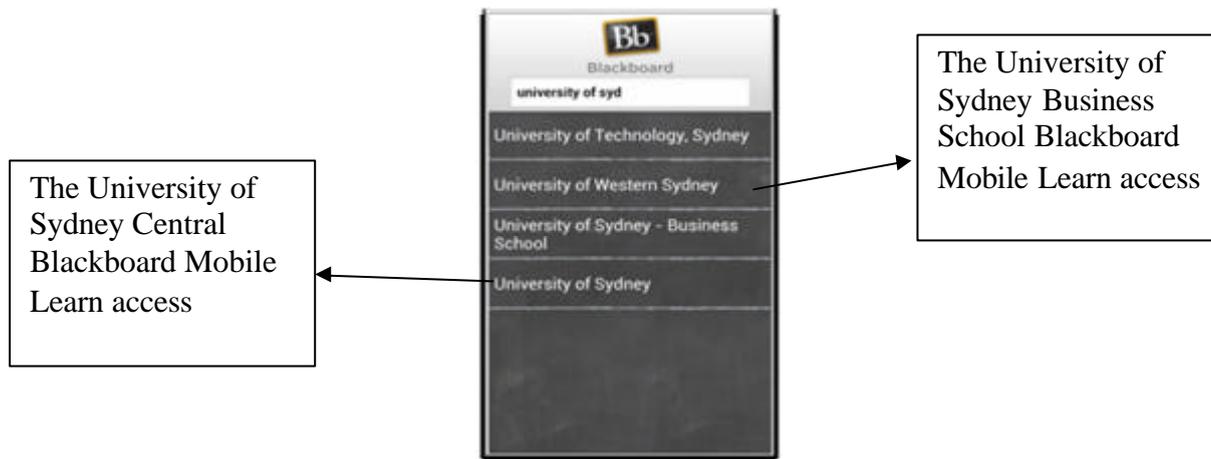


Figure 4. Blackboard Learn App

Where To GO?

The confusion was also caused by Business School students trying to access the school's LMS by going into the main university app which linked directly to the University Blackboard LMS and not the Business School LMS; both Blackboard Inc and the University IT areas were not able to create (or strategically reluctant to create) another unique button to allow access to the Business School LMS from the native mobile app. There are now discussions at both the university level and the school level for centralisation of both systems to be under one license agreement proposed for late 2013.

SYDNEY UNI IN AN APP

The Sydney University app uses specific modules such as Maps, Events, Current University News, University Dates, the Library, Finding Staff, Finding Units of Study and access to the Blackboard LMS system. There has been a high percentage of downloads to the university native app, however the reviews stated on the Android Market Place rated the app quite low (average of 2.9 out of 5) (see figure 5). From the user's perspective, the app needed much rework to include linkage to areas such scheduling and timetabling that could be embedded directly into each Blackboard course for finding room allocations, times and schedules.

"Find staff a very useful feature, maps also good but Camden map could include more of the other farms. Unit of study feature should change into view personal timetable with links to uos info, as bookmarking subjects soon becomes blank for some reason and you can't remove them...not sure if anyone else has that problem :/ don't see much use for the photos though" (Review by a student - August 2, 2012)

Since 23 July 2012, 1,000 – 5,000 downloads were recorded for version 1.0. Most reviewers have indicated that it is a good enough app considering it's the first version 1.0 and they have higher expectations from the app if the university decides to move forward with future versions.



Figure 5. Users' Reviews and Average Ratings – University of Sydney App

Design Challenges

The majority of academic staff in the Business School will not be aware of some of the design issues that are associated with mobile content, or with the web design challenges given that different screen

resolutions must be able to co-exist. Most content will be added by staff into Blackboard hoping that it will work for all students on any device using any browser. The technicalities will be left up to the eLearning teams and the IT helpdesk to sort out by making sure the sites and content work, especially when it comes to online exam periods.

To counter these issues, a proposed future one-hour lunch-time workshop for academic and support staff is scheduled and will focus on specific areas in developing “mobile accessible content”. The workshops would focus on areas such as:

- Assisting staff to consider screen resolution; connection speed (ie WiFi); different availability of hand held devices on campus; and barriers to learning for users who struggle with swipe screen and the complex menu system on mobile devices
- Design issues such as text size, image file formats, document formatting – what is the best practice?
- Embedding media files such as movie clips, sound files and interactive animations into the content
- Creating mobile compatible tests for students (true/false, multiple choice, short answers)
- Providing access to and building eBooks and online content from publishers such as Pearsons and McGraw-Hill.

THE FUTURE

The implementation of mobile technology at both the university level and the school level are premature and there needs to be a cohesive and strategic approach to mobile learning that would be agreed upon by all faculties and stakeholders. An Enterprise Strategy for Mobile Learning would include:

1. Strategy for use of mobile devices by all faculties and schools that could be adapted to their local needs
2. Making content and websites “mobile device ready” (eg. Flash on iPhones) and using best practices
3. Specific mobile learning content for students’ own tablets or phones readily available for users – (bring your own device – BYOD) approach
4. Availability of both technical and teaching staff to be involved in projects to explore and test mobile learning.

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