



The Academics' Voice: mLearning Student-Generated Activities in a Malaysian University

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ABSTRACT

mLearning, or mobile learning, student-generated activities enable students to adopt an active approach in learning their subjects. In developed countries, such as the USA, UK and Australia, this method is widely practiced compared to developing countries, such as Malaysia. The largely qualitative study reported in this paper focuses on extending this practice to the Malaysian context. An intervention involved students of local cultural studies creating multimedia content using mobile devices, such as mobile phones, to record video and audio, and take photos. Following the intervention, interviews with five academics at a Malaysian university were undertaken in order to understand the academics' voice in this student-generated mLearning. The data from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis and organised using NVivo software. The main themes that emerged were the affordance of mobile devices for mLearning, particularly in student-generated learning; mLearning achievements; and opportunities and requirements in overcoming mLearning challenges. Thus, this study indicates the holistic perspectives of academics concerning the contributions of student-generated activities in the Malaysian context in studying local cultural subjects.

Keywords

Malaysian university, academic, mobile learning, student-generated content, multimedia content

INTRODUCTION

mLearning involves different types of activity for students as compared to the passive traditional 'chalk and talk' didactic classroom activities. One type of mLearning is student-generated activities. For example, students can use their mobile devices, such as the multimedia functions of mobile phones, to generate multimedia content. A lack of mLearning content has been reported for a large number of subjects in Asian countries, including Malaysia (So 2012; Ariffin, Dyson, & Hoskins-McKenzie, 2012). Since there is a large ownership of mobile phones among Malaysian university students (Hussin, 2011), there are possibilities for students to create their own multimedia content for learning. This can be applied to local cultural studies (LCS), or the study of the local Malaysian culture that pertains to subjects relating to the humanities. By facilitating mLearning student-generated activities, students are introduced to a more up-to-date approach which could enhance learning LCS. This author believes that student-generated mLearning activities could be used to reduce the challenge of the lack of local content for the Malaysian context. Likewise, students could become content producers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies conducted in other parts of the world demonstrate the success of student-generated mLearning. For example, students conducting fieldwork could use mLearning, such as for audio and video recordings through interviews with a field expert (Dyson et al., 2008; Litchfield et al., 2010).

In addition, students taking photographs in a specialised context inside or outside the classroom has been reported (Lai et al. 2007; Looi et al., 2009).

mLearning activities lend themselves to LCS in a variety of ways. A UNESCO mLearning report in Asia by Deriquito and Domingo (2012) explained that students needed to be given the opportunity to produce more local content through mLearning. This could be undertaken through the use of mobile devices, such as mobile phones. In fact, student-generated content could happen anywhere, whether in the classroom through practical activities using mobile phones, such as recording videos and taking photos, or outside the classroom (Shih et al., 2012). However, there is limited literature concerning student-generated content for LCS in the Malaysian university context.

METHODOLOGY

This research approach was qualitative and involved interviews (Mertens, 2010) with five academics who teach the following subjects: Local Culture and National Heritage; History; Education Action Research; Drama; and Cooking. The selection was based on their interest in the intervention of student-generated content using mobile devices. The interviews took place following the first stage of a larger scale data collection garnering perspectives on mLearning contributions to LCS in which students generated content using their mobile devices (Ariffin, 2014; Ariffin & Dyson, 2012).

The semi-structured questions were devised based upon the mLearning literature; for example, the student-generated activities in experiential learning were as demonstrated by Dyson et al. (2008) in the developed world, and in Asian countries by Pouezevara and Khan (2007), and Valk, Rashid and Elder (2010). This assisted in understanding the perspectives of the academics concerning the contribution of mLearning for LCS.

The interview questions included: “How did the students use mobile devices for student-generated content activities?” “What are the advantages of student-generated activities in learning?” “What challenges do they encounter in performing these activities?”

The data from the interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

FINDINGS

The major themes that emerged from the interviews were the mobile devices’ affordance for mLearning, particularly in student-generated learning; mLearning achievements; and opportunities and requirements in overcoming mLearning challenges.

Mobile Devices Affordance

Some sub themes that emerged from this main theme include the increased awareness for resource and information sharing; mobile phones as a tool for revision; enhancement of communication between academics and students; and the saving of travel time.

Increased Awareness for Resource and Information Sharing

Academics reported that their students could use mobile phones to share multimedia content even though they were in remote areas. For example:

“But things will be different during the long semester break. Most of them will be returning to their own village (Kampung). With the availability of the mobile phone, the increase in the information sharing for student-generated activities will happen no matter where they are.”

Mobile Phones as a Tool for Revision

The academic from the Drama class informed the researcher how his students could record choreography movements of dance steps for revision and practice for a concert. For example:

“To remember the steps and flexibility of their body in dancing, therefore they will video record their moves. It can be practiced either at home or outside the classroom.”

Enhancement of Communication between Academics and Students

The academic from the Cooking class recounted that her students, who were videoing themselves cooking in her class, communicated with her using Facebook concerning her orders for ingredients in preparation before the class. For example:

“It is a good tool for communication with your students about your subject.”

The Education Action Research academic used email to manage his class when he could not meet up. Additionally, he used the mobile phone to assist students to solve queries about the subject directly.

Saving Travel Time

Students always carry mobile devices such as mobile phones. As a result, when they visit cultural sites, such as museums, palaces and archaeological sites, they can use their phones for recording without having to collect special recording equipment. This saves a lot of time. For example:

“They can save their time and there is no need to go back from class to find the information.”

mLearning Achievements

The interviews that followed the student-generated local content activities demonstrated the involvement of students with classroom activities and outdoor fieldwork activities. Students engaged in self-exploratory learning using mobile devices and worked collaboratively with friends in undertaking their assignments. It is worth noting that these activities involved a mixed use of mobile devices, such as mobile phones, cameras and laptops. In this activity, mLearning was utilised to complement and enrich existing learning. The sub-themes that emerged were students accomplishing assignments using mobile devices, development of new multimedia skills and achieving better learning outcomes.

Students Accomplishing Assignments using Mobile Devices

The academic for the Cooking class stated that her students used video recording functions intensively for their Cooking assignment concerning food preparation for the Royal State of Perak. This was the first time students in her class developed digital video demonstrations to be submitted with their reports. She indicated that her students presented their assignments using mobile devices. For example:

“About 98% of them can video record using their own mobile phones for the Cooking assignment.”

Development of New Multimedia Skills

mLearning has contributed to developing new skills among the students, such as being able to record and to create their own videos using mobile devices. As an example, the Cooking teacher mentioned that her students developed multimedia skills to record their own ideas through voice recordings and videos. The students used these skills to generate digital videos on recipes and food cooking assignments. The academic assessed her students' performance via the digital video that the students produced. This demonstrated their understanding concerning how they were able to cook the food properly.

Achieving Better Learning Outcomes

Academics reported better learning outcomes and students reported better understanding from student-generated activities. Students were motivated and had worked collaboratively. This approach leads to assignments of a better quality compared to the traditional approach. The Cooking class academic informed the researcher that her students were producing better quality assignments as demonstrated by the production of their local cooking videos using mobile devices. They had made a significant improvement in their learning. The quality of the videos showed that the students had understood what they had been taught in class. For example:

“When I see the report, it reflects the comment that the group has recorded my advice during class using mobile phones. That is one of the transformations.”

Opportunities and Requirements for Overcoming mLearning Challenges

Challenges are barriers that could delay the progress of mLearning for LCS. However, most of those challenges can be overcome as demonstrated from the findings. The following are the sub-themes of the perspectives of the participants concerning the opportunities and requirements: overcoming technical challenges; overcoming academics' reluctance to allow students to use mobile devices in class and fieldwork; and the requirement for the implementation of a standardised mobile device.

Overcoming Technical Challenges

One of the academics reported that students assisted one another to convert the file format, which reduced the failure of the conversion of the audio files. Peer assistance emerged as one of the possible solutions to solve technical issues in this research. For example:

“... with the assistance of their friends, the problems were resolved.”

Electricity recharge points for the mobile phones are extremely important for the mobile phones to be functional. There is a power station to charge their mobile phones and cameras at the archaeological sites of 'Gunung Senyum', as mentioned by the History academic. For example:

“There is also a charger at the base camp that provides electricity.”

Overcoming Reluctance to Allow Students to Use Mobile Devices in Class

Academics are more open to using mobile phones in their classes after experiencing student-generated activities. The Cooking academic reported that her class had undergone a transformation by using videos in the classroom.

“This is a positive transformation in learning the cooking subject.”

Implementation of a Standardised Mobile Device

Participants suggested consideration for the implementation of standard mobile devices, similar to the previous implementation of laptops by the Malaysian government. This implementation of standard mobile devices could assist in learning LCS more effectively. For example:

“The most important thing is that we need to standardise the technology and devices.”

DISCUSSION

Empowering Students to Undertake Activities for Student-Generated Content: Reducing the Challenges of the Lack of Local Content

This study demonstrates that student-generated mLearning activities positively benefit LCS subjects in the creation of multimedia local content. In addition, students were empowered to complete their assignments with mobile devices, through student-generated activities. This is aligned with the studies demonstrating 'learning by doing'. For example, this study has accomplished the following: students conducting and completing their assignments using mobile devices, developing new multimedia skills in the creation of videos, and achieving better learning outcomes for the subjects of LCS. This study is comparable with that of Dyson et al. (2008) who incorporated mLearning activities. However, this research added the Malaysian context in LCS for student-generated activities. Students are motivated and engaged in student-generated activities through the creation of multimedia content (Litchfield et al., 2010). In addition, this facilitated their accomplishment in managing and completing their work for the LCS studies. Thus, students can potentially become content producers and reduce the challenges that exist from the lack of local content that has been highlighted in Asian countries, as reported by So (2012).

Academics Become More Open and Show More Interest in mLearning after Student-Generated Activities

Academics reported being more open, particularly after being exposed to student-generated content activities after witnessing their students' good performance in creating quality multimedia content. They encouraged their students to use the multimedia functions of the mobile phones, such as the

video recording, audio recording and photography functions. This experience is aligned with the studies of Pouezevara and Khan (2007), and Valk, Rashid and Elder (2010) in Bangladesh, who found that academics are more appreciative of the use of mobile phones after student-generated activities. Furthermore, academics in this study changed their attitude and expressed more interest in using mobile phones for learning after experiencing the mLearning activities for LCS.

CONCLUSION

This research reflects the change of attitude of academics towards learners being more proactive in their use of emergent technologies of mLearning. They changed their perspectives to become more open towards mLearning student-generated activities. In addition, this study demonstrated the abilities of the students to become content producers and reduce the challenge of the lack of learning content. There is considerable potential for mLearning student-generated activities, particularly for LCS in the Malaysian university context. Thus, from the perspectives of the academics, using mLearning student-generated activities did enhance learning LCS for their students.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATION

The study could be expanded to measure the change of attitude of academics by comparing these findings with attitudes of academics prior to experiencing their students engaging in student-generated activities using mobile devices.

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