mLearning in Malaysian Universities: Local Ethical Considerations for Mobile Phone Use

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ABSTRACT

Ethical policies are significant in regulating the use of mobile phones for mLearning. However, in developing countries, such as Malaysia, this area is fairly new. This article discusses research conducted within the Malaysian university system to gain perspectives from academics and students about the use of mobile phones for learning. The research methods used were interviews and focus groups. The findings were grouped according to several themes: concerns about the use of mobile phones inside the classroom; regulation and self-regulation of mobile phone use; banning of mobile phones from the classroom; allowing their use in emergency and special situations; uncertainty about ethical policies for using mobile phones; and worries about students' potential disconnection from social life. Various approaches to regulate mobile phone use were discovered and are discussed in this article.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the emergence of mobile learning (mLearning) in the developing countries of South-East Asia, there has been very slow progress in developing ethical policies for governing the use of mobile devices in the classroom (So 2012). Deriquito and Domingo (2012) state that implementing mLearning strategies on ethics in South-East Asia is still new. This contrasts with the situation in Australia, Europe and the USA, where ethical issues surrounding mobile phone use and mLearning have been discussed for some years (Andrews, Dyson, & Wishart, 2013; Dyson, Andrews, Smyth, & Wallace, 2013; Kukulska-Hulme 2008), and guidelines on the acceptable use of mobile technology in educational institutions are now available (AMTA n.d.; CoSN 2011). These approaches could be applied to the Asian situation but may not be suitable to local context due to different cultural, behavioural and religious norms.

Considering specifically the Malaysian context, the literature indicates the possibility for mLearning ethics to be developed (Hussin 2011). A starting point could be the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (SKMM), which determines what types of mobile content can be disseminated in Malaysia, with the emphasis on ethical issues such as the portrayal of violence, offensive, morally improper material including nudity and sex, hate propaganda, threatened national security, and the dissemination of false information that can trigger racial disturbances (SKMM Guidelines 2012). Mohamad (2012) is one of the few researchers to have included ethics in her study of mLearning in Malaysia. She highlights some of the ethical implications of mLearning for studying English at Malaysian secondary schools, drawing on interviews with teachers and school officials.

Her suggestions for overcoming problems include the development of acceptable use policies; the raising of awareness with teachers, students and parents regarding appropriate use; and the enforcement of penalties on troublemakers who do not follow the rules for using their mobile phones appropriately. Despite the significance of her study, mobile phone use has still been banned in schools (The Star Newspaper 2012), which has made it very challenging to conduct research on this topic in the Malaysian school system.

This study addresses the issue of ethics and mLearning using a different approach, by obtaining firsthand perspectives from academics and students at Malaysian universities. Since mobile phones have not been banned at university level, this provides a more feasible way of looking at the issue in the current climate. As Mohamad's (2012) research did not collect student opinions, it is hoped the perspectives of students reported here may provide a more balanced view of ethical issues surrounding mLearning and mobile phone use at educational institutions.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was deemed suitable for collecting in-depth perspectives from the research participants. Questions asked were open-ended, such as: "What do you think of the ethics of using mobile phones in your classroom?" "Why do you think it is important?" "How do you decide on ethical rules for using mobile phones?" The questions focused on mobile phones since nearly all Malaysian university students own phones, and bring their phones to class with them.

Semi-structured interviews with academics and focus groups with students were conducted at four Malaysian universities, mainly in the public university sector and therefore with a majority of students with a Malay cultural background. The academics and students were from a wide range of predominantly humanities subjects and were recruited by purposive sampling. There were 15 academic interviewees and 127 students in 15 focus groups in this study. The participants' involvement was voluntary. The responses were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study is part of a larger scale data collection in accumulating perspectives on mLearning contributions to the study of local culture (Arrifin, & Dyson, 2012).

FINDINGS

The major themes that emerged from the interviews and focus groups were as follows: concerns about the use of mobile phones inside the classroom; regulation and self-regulation using mobile phones; banning of mobile phones inside the classroom; allowing the use of mobile phones in emergency or special situations; uncertainty about ethical policies for using mobile phones; and worries about students' disconnection from social life.

Concerns about the Use of Mobile Phones inside the Classroom

There were growing concerns amongst the academics of how mobile phones could be used inappropriately inside the classroom. These were worries about what might go wrong if mobile phones were used for classroom learning without the academic taking responsibility to manage the problem. These concerns constituted the issue of not having proper ethical guidelines in place. Some academics noted that students could lose focus on learning during class and believed students would find it hard to focus. For example, concentration could be lost while trying to do two things at once, such as playing videos while at the same time the teacher was lecturing. Another academic believed that students would be caught wasting time on social media, such as Facebook. One of the academics stressed there could be plagiarism. Alarmingly, according to one academic, students could breach security, such as installing spy software to obtain other people's details and information using their mobile phones; this could threaten the security of people's mobile phones. Another academic perceived that students could misuse recordings to ridicule the lecturer of the subject using mobile phones:

> *"There are cases where not all students are pleased with their lecturers, therefore the recording by students can be misused for personal interest."*

Students commented that their teacher would be annoyed if they saw students using their mobile phones during classes. For example, they agreed with the academics that it was inappropriate to use mobile phones for surfing the internet while the teacher was teaching and would result in the student not being able to focus. However, they knew of students who flouted the rules:

> *"If mobile phones are used at school you will get caught. There are students who bring mobile phones to school, quietly and unnoticed. We have experienced this. There are rules, but they have been broken. Rules are only rules, and the students won't follow them."*

On the other hand, student participants reported that the elderly were always suspicious of them when using mobile phones. They assumed that students were being unethical and disrespectful towards them when using their phones:

> *"The elderly find it hard to comprehend us young people using mobile phones."*

Regulation and Self-Regulation Using Mobile Phones

Academics use their own judgment and implementation of rules as educators in order to ensure the classroom is in control and that learning happens when mobile phones are being used. Most academics implemented their own regulations to ensure the students do not breach rules inside the classroom. One academic mentioned they had the power to ensure their classes ran smoothly, with or without mobile phones:

> *"You have to set the rules. If we want to run discussions in blogs or forums, the students need to follow the rules. If there aren't any rules the students will disobey them and they will be penalised for that matter. One of the ethical policies in my class is: do not discuss the issues of politics or religion. Other things are okay to discuss, as long as you mind your language. Respect other people."*

One interviewee was not worried about the usage of mobile phones by his students, as he said he had trust in his students: *"I allow the students to use mobile phones as it is relating to knowledge"*. An academic indicated that, as long as students do not spam, it would be fine. In the Malaysian culture it is important to be polite and respect other people while using mobile phones for learning.

Students reported they apply self-regulation when using mobile phones for learning by asking permission of other participants, particularly when doing assignments in the field. For example, they obtained verbal permission from an elderly person before taking her photo:

> *"We as students have taken the time to ask permission from senior citizens before allowing us to take their photos using our mobile phones".*

Banning of Mobile Phones Inside the Classroom

Mobile phones have been seen as an object that will disturb the class, if mishandled. One of the academics who taught cooking banned the use of mobile phones for talking and SMS during class. This academic did not allow students to use mobile phones inside the class in order to minimise interruptions and student misconduct. Another academic stated they could use mobile phones only for fieldwork. Certain academics are very strict, in order to control the class:

> *"As a Batik Textile teacher, I do not like mobile phones to be used inside the classroom and they must be put into silent mode."*

One of the students indicated their lecturer had made it clear to the students not to use mobile phones in the classroom. Students stated the mobile phone was not suitable to be used in Malaysian schools inside the classroom due to the probability of misuse; however it is more appropriate for mobile phones to be used in the universities.

Emergency and Special Uses

Under special circumstances, such as emergencies, the academics allowed students to use mobile phones. One academic permitted the use of mobile phones in both emergency cases and for disabled students:

"... for special candidates, for example students with a hearing impairment: these students can make their own recording and play it back later. On the other hand, students in family situations might have their own responsibility, for example a younger brother of a sibling can be contacted in emergency cases. They can use the handset in this particular situation."

Uncertainty about Ethical Policies for Using Mobile Phones

Academics were uncertain whether there were any rules for them to follow for students' learning using devices such as mobile phones. There appear to be no rules on the ethical use of mobile phones inside the classroom and, therefore, this has been a concern for them. Uncertainty about permission to use mobile phones inside the classroom has increased doubt:

"I am not really sure of the usage of mobile phones by the students for recording or for other documents."

Disconnection of Students from Social Life

Part of the ethical concern in using mobile phones for learning is that students can get disconnected from social life. One academic stated that students could become less social if they were too dependent on the device:

"From the perspective of emotions and social connections it can be a bit of a distraction."

Some students had the same perspective.

DISCUSSION

The participants in this study were not aware of any ethical policies for mLearning in the Malaysian university context. According to one of the academics, the main priority is to foster mLearning in Malaysia, and an ethics policy will be an important part of this: *"I think it can be solved by installing ethics"*.

It is understood from this study that mLearning could be implemented with students' own mobile phones, however with careful consideration and control, to ensure learning happens and students are not distracted. Two differing ethical approaches emerged from this study: one based on self-regulated mLearning, and the other based on enforced discipline and even banning of mobile phones. Trust and respect for others was emphasised as one of the aspects that should be taken seriously while implementing mLearning in the Malaysian university context. These positive attitudes and cultural values, such as respect for others, particularly the elderly, are an important part of Malaysian society. Adopting a self-regulated approach is in contrast to the sometimes severe penalties for unethical mobile use suggested by Mohamad (2012).

Mobile phone ethics should take into account the needs of disenfranchised users, such as disabled students, having access to better education. This could possibly be achieved by giving those marginalised students access to mLearning (Andrews et al., 2011). In addition, this should apply to improve education for poor students from rural areas in the 'Kampung', or remote villages, in order for them to access mLearning resources.

With respect to the social aspect, participants should not be isolated whilst engaged with mobile phones or get disconnected from the real world they are living in. They should not become antisocial by being overly focused on their devices. In fact, Malay culture highlights the importance of integrating well in society and not isolating oneself. Therefore participants should exercise moderation using mobile devices such as mobile phones and not allow disruption of their healthy social life.

CONCLUSION

It is necessary to have an awareness of using mobile devices ethically for mLearning, and this should be understood by both academics and students. It is interesting that generally the academics and students agreed with each other on major points regarding the ethical use of mobile phones in the

classroom and in their learning. For example, both appreciated the distraction that mobile phones in a class can create. However, students saw a generation gap in that their elders did not really understand their use of mobile phones. Self-regulation within clearly defined limits based on the cultural value of respect for others, was one of the most positive aspects to come out of this study and one which would most likely appeal to both academics and students.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE WORK

The lack of ethics policies to manage mobile device use in the educational system revealed by this study needs to be addressed, with involvement of all parties, including policy makers, academics and students. This study could provide a platform for further discussions in fostering awareness and establishing policy for using mobile phones and promoting mLearning in Malaysia and other developing countries in accordance with their local culture and values. The SKMM Guidelines (2012) would be a good start for policy development in the Malaysian context.

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