Creative Teaching and Learning Strategies for Novice Users of Mobile Technologies

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses perspectives of creative teaching and learning strategies in the new learning context of mobile technology, particularly for novice learners. The discussion presented here is framed by two case studies and uses an ethnographical approach, informed by participant observation to consider the experiences of users of mobile devices who do not have prior experience with information and communication technologies. Although the lack of prior understanding of the novice user initially presented a hurdle for working with mobile technology tools, it was noted that an ‘innocence of perceiving and behaving’ (Maslow, 1971) could advantage these learners to work in new and creative ways that may not be considered by more experienced users. It was also identified that the creative learning could be facilitated by intentional support and both innovative teaching strategies and imaginative teaching scenarios are important components of this framework.

Keywords: Creative Teaching, Ethnographical Approach, Mobile Technologies, Novice Users, Teaching and Learning Strategies

INTRODUCTION

The advent of mobile technologies provides an opportunity to reexamine perspectives of teaching and learning. While mobile learning devices such as smart phones and tablets might be seen by some as the latest sequential step in the progression of personal technologies over the last 30 years, in some ways the ability to access information and communication seamlessly in any location offers a completely new dimension to previous experiences with technology. In order to think in new ways about mobile learning, educators may need to let go of some previous understandings of ICT and learning and focus on creativity as a key to empowering learners.

Perceptions of creativity have changed over the last century. Once, the notion of creative thinking was the domain of exceptional individuals: artists; writers; performers and radical alternate thinkers such as Einstein. However, over the years with influences from theorists such as De Bono, this perception has adapted to consider creative thinking and innovative practices as valuable life skills that most people can develop in order to extend their own potential and to contribute to the well being of society.
Teachers need to recognize that all learners have the potential of creative thought and need to identify the characteristics of this type of learning and develop strategies to support learners to be creative.

So what does it mean to be creative? This study uses the classic definition provided by Maslow (1971) as a reference point for creative learning. Maslow suggested that creativity involves “a total fascination with the matter at hand” where the learner exhibits “an innocence of perceiving and behaving”. In this moment, a learner needs to let go of past experience and future expectations in order to experience “fusion with the reality being observed” (p. 64). In order to immerse in the process to this magnitude, the learner needs favorable circumstances. It is quite practical to suggest that to be creative, a learner needs time and the physical space to think (Loveless, 2011). Further, having freedom of choice for the path of discovery and the direction of exploration are also essential factors (Sawyer, 2011). Creativity also has been linked to other notions of thinking and learning including imagination, play (Kangas, 2010) and even happiness (Di Giacinto, Ferrante, & Vistocco, 2007).

Conversely, there are factors that are seen to impede creativity for learners. Lack of time for thinking through is an obvious issue, especially if the learner is being pressured to hurry (Jeffrey, 2006). Likewise if the learner is restricted to a physical space and especially if that space is noisy or uncomfortable, then they are less likely to think and work in creative ways (Darmody, Smyth & Doherty, 2010). Too many constraints on the expected outcome can also restrict a learner’s ability to be creative. For example, if a teacher has described the parameters of a task and clearly has an expectation of the end result, then the student may reach the goal that the teacher had in mind, but the outcome is not likely to be an overly creative solution (Yelland & Masters, 2009).

The term ‘learning’ is used intensively in the realm of education and, oddly, it often seems to describe the focus of the teacher rather than the practices of the learners themselves. It might be argued that learning as a process is so intensely personal that really only the learner can conceptualize what it might mean to them but nevertheless, teachers make it their business to generalise about how learners learn and therefore how they can support this process. Society’s conceptualization of learning has evolved over decades and includes traditional strategies such as listening, taking notes and memorizing but also structural advice including a sense of sequence that starts at the beginning, reading instructions and working through a task in a linear process.

The expression ‘creative learning’, infers that this type of learning is somehow different from ordinary learning. Learners are told to ‘think outside the square’ with the implication that thinking inside the square is the regular way to learn and therefore thinking outside the square involves doing things differently. In reality though, teachers can promote creative learning by encouraging learners to add to their repertoire of learning strategies. In particular, learners need to be able to interchange learning strategies when their usual approach to a task isn’t productive or successful. An example of an alternative approach might be rather than sequentially working through a problem, the user adopts an ‘unraveling’ strategy where they focus on components of the task that make more sense to them first and master or solve each component as a stepping stone to more challenging aspects. Other strategies that may be conducive for creative learning might include risk-taking, making connections, changing perspectives and persistence.

Over the last twenty plus years educators have had plenty of practice in applying a conventional sense of understanding of learning to the use of computers and computer software. Over the last decade, teachers who are inclined to harness ICT for teaching purposes, have watching the coming of mobile learning devices with interest. Now that it is feasible to use these devices in traditional teaching contexts such as schools and classrooms, these teachers
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