

Mobile Innovation: Communicating with professional students

Using texting and email to contact students in their workplace who are reluctant to login to Blackboard frequently

The aim

This course involved students that were on placement for long periods of time (only six days at university during the year). The tutor found that her students, already professionals in their workplaces, were reluctant to login to Blackboard frequently. The tutor aimed to see if mobile communications would provide a better means of communication and keeping students engaged.

Benefits

- Students had more convenient access to the course information
- Students were able to share resources in a place they could access after completing the course
- Students are already familiar with their mobile phone environments

The approach

Initially the students asked the tutor for a place to share and look for resources. The tutor set up a Blackboard site, but found that the students did not find the site convenient to access either from home or from their workplaces, as this meant having to find a PC or laptop from which to log onto the learning environment. However they all had smartphones, and indicated that they'd prefer to receive academic information via these.

For the remainder of their course, the tutor used text and email to communicate with the trainees rather than posting announcements and resources on the Blackboard site. In addition, the students decided to start using Dropbox, an online tool for storing and sharing resources.

She set up a group in Outlook with her students' emails and sent messages to them using that. Follow-up emails were sent when students did not respond to her initial mails. This way she managed to ascertain that everyone was getting the information and making use of it.

The outcome

The innovation demonstrated that it is possible to replace key communication functions of the VLE with mobile technologies. From the tutor perspective, it was easier and quicker to communicate with students via text and email than by using Blackboard.

Student opinions were gathered via surveys and a focus group. These confirmed that the trainees accessed their phones every day, but accessed the Blackboard site much less frequently, if at all. They used their phones as the main means of communication with tutor and other trainees, and rarely, if ever, did this through Blackboard. Time was a barrier when it came to using the VLE, which tended to be at the bottom of their 'to do' list. They found their phones easier and more convenient to use, commenting that Blackboard was cumbersome, old style and hard to find information on.

The outcome (continued)

The phones provided valuable notification reminders about email as well as an easy way to access incoming messages. However, some trainees commented that they are not allowed to use their phone in school as there are different policies on this so the preference for phones did not always apply.

In addition, they felt that Blackboard was temporary as access to the site would disappear when they finished their course. They found an online tool called Dropbox easier to use for sharing resources, particularly via mobile devices. They could keep access to Dropbox after completion of the course.

Future development

With future cohorts of students in similar workplace contexts, the tutor will still use a Blackboard site to share the module guidance and for assignment submission but will continue to use texts and emails for communication purposes. In addition she'll promote the use of Dropbox earlier in the year for sharing resources amongst students and will consider the potential of the Blackboard mobile app for supporting student discussions.

Profile

Tutor name:
Alison Hramiak

Faculty:
Development & Society

Size of cohort:
Small (1-30 students)

Technologies used:
Mobile devices, email,
texts, Dropbox,
Blackboard

These case studies came from the Mobile Innovations project which experimented with using student mobile devices for teaching and learning.

Recommendations

The module leader recommends the following for others considering a similar approach:

- Consider using mobile technologies as a means of communicating and sharing resources with busy professional students
- Check whether students have access to their phones in the workplace
- Introduce the approach early in the course - both the idea of sharing and communicating between peers and also the technologies which will be used