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Lisa K. Kervin

University of Wollongong, lkervin@uow.edu.au

Doug Reid

University of Wollongong, dougr@uow.edu.au

Jeff Vardy

Wollongong Diocese of Catholic Education

Carroll Hindle

Wollongong Diocese of Catholic Education

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A partnership for iPod pedagogy: Using the technology of millennial learners across educational contexts

Lisa Kervin, Doug Reid

Faculty of Education

University of Wollongong

Jeff Vardy, Carroll Hindle

Wollongong Diocese of Catholic Education

This paper explores collaboration between researchers at the tertiary level, with primary school teachers and their students as iPods are integrated into learning experiences. Embarking on this partnership, it is our aim to weave value-added, mutually beneficial and collaborative relationships into our on-going professional interactions as we work towards the development of a pedagogical framework to support classroom teachers in using iPods and podcasting in their educational settings. Such collaborative relationships have been promoted as a way to foster professional relationships, provide learning opportunities for educators, encourage change and develop common understanding across contexts.

Appropriate pedagogy and procedures to assist educators in the incorporation of this technology within their classroom context have begun to emerge through professional collaboration, observation of the students and interviews with both teachers and students. This study provides example for educators who collaborate with researchers to incorporate new technologies into their teaching. It also presents our experiences with team building and communication, which have proven valuable in the process of integrating iPods and podcasting into learning activities for children.

Keywords: iPods, pedagogy, implementation, mobile technology, primary education

Introduction

Educators have been called to reconsider the technological needs, skills and preferences of students when providing for classroom learning experiences. While the inclusion of technology has been promoted, in many instances little support has been given to teachers both in terms of skills and support in meaningful integration of these in learning experiences. While the use of iPods, podcasts and other personal on-demand technologies continue to increase within contemporary society, it appears that many educational settings have not yet adapted to accommodate their use. This project aims to investigate the stages involved in implementing iPods and podcasting into primary school classrooms.

Supporting the needs of millennial learners

It has been asserted that millennial learners need to be taught using the technology they are accustomed to (Dede, 2005). In this paper we argue that primary teachers face challenges and need to review the tools they use in teaching and learning experiences. Enabling students to focus on what they determine is the necessary material to be at any given time is one strength of the personal on-demand nature of the podcast / iPod relationship. Building the developing pedagogical understandings around this relationship is a necessary step in the evolution of the use of this technology in educational contexts within contemporary society. Pedagogical frameworks to assist educators in the incorporation of this technology within educational contexts do not yet exist in the literature.

There has been a global movement to implement modern education technologies in universities (Oliver, 2001). After reviewing the literature, we have found minimal evidence of the educational implementation of personal on-demand technologies. Belanger (2005) presented detailed findings about academic uses for iPods in tertiary settings. Miller and Piller (2005) present the use of iPods in tertiary setting as a solution to the challenge of providing course content in dual audio and visual modes. None of the reviewed sources delve to any great extent into the pedagogy behind the use of iPods in their educational settings as most focus on the technology and functionality of the iPod itself. There is some focus on the use of

podcasts within the literature (for example, Cebeci & Tekdal, 2006; Crawford, Smith, & Smith, 2006; Flanagan & Calandra, 2005). Information presented in these sources often include details regarding Really Simple Syndication (RSS) feeds, media aggregator software, podcast subscription explanations, and how to create and podcast content. The literature presents a need to explore the uses and pedagogy involved with using iPods in addition to podcasts with millennial learners across educational contexts.

Partnership to support the change

The success of any educational project is largely dependent on its implementation (Clarke, Butler, Schmidt-Hansen, & Somerville, 2004; Volery, 2001). In response to this, we see partnership between the tertiary and primary contexts as a way to support this process. Such collaborations can enhance professional learning as the teams pool knowledge in the quest for shared understandings. Darling-Hammond (1997) acknowledges that such discussion and collaboration provides avenues for professionals to articulate their thinking as they communicate ideas to each other and work towards a shared vision. Such partnerships need time for talk and collective action amongst participants.

Partnerships between tertiary and primary contexts are often conceived as a way to bring about change. The process of bringing about educational change is indeed a complex process. Hoban (2002) identifies the "...multidimensionality and problematic nature of educational change" and the implications it presents for "...thinking about the nature of teaching, teacher learning and the change process" (p. 40). Collaboration between researchers and teachers is a way to foster professional relationships, bring about change and develop common understandings across contexts. This paper reports on our experiences working with a school / university partnership as we look to what we know about using iPod and podcasting technologies from tertiary settings, and how this can inform their introduction in the primary context.

The project: Establishing the partnership

This paper reports upon the initial data collection process of a partnership created between two researchers at one university, and two Grade 4 teachers located at two different primary schools local to the university. An action-learning framework guides the project as the different personnel collaborate on the introduction of iPods within the two Grade 4 classrooms. At the time of writing, the iPods have been introduced to the students and they have used them in their classrooms for a ten-week period. Data has been collected focusing on the process the teachers and researchers engaged with as they constructed this initial ten-week program to incorporate the iPods into their classrooms. This planning, implementation and data collection process has been tempered due to mandated curriculum expectations. Data collected to date includes researcher observations during times of collaborative planning, semi-structured interviews with the teachers and individual students at scheduled intervals over the ten-week period. Data have been analysed by identifying and coding categories based on the emerging themes.

Working together as co-learners

Once the project team was established, it became necessary to identify the specific roles and responsibilities for each. We recognised that personnel from both tertiary and primary contexts have tremendous knowledge they are able to bring to the project. It was our aim to weave value-added, mutually beneficial and collaborative relationships into our on-going professional interactions. Each team member spent some time familiarising themselves with the iPods before any discussion of classroom implementation began. This was an important process as we all needed to be familiar with the technology and resulted in much discussion about issues of organisation and management with the iPods. The iPods were divided amongst the two classes according to the needs expressed by the teachers. Teacher A expressed interest in using the iPods with the whole class, therefore 14 were allocated to this class enabling one iPod to be shared between two students. Teacher B identified a small group of students in the class who she felt would particularly benefit from using the iPods, so 5 iPods were allocated to this class. Teacher B expressed her vision that after the initial focus these children would become the 'experts' who could then assist other students in the classroom.

The entire team formally met twice in this initial phase to collaboratively plan teaching and learning experiences to incorporate the iPods within the Grade 4 classrooms. During this time the team members looked to the literature for examples of how iPods had been used in educational settings and deconstructed these with view of what they could "look" like in their Grade 4 classrooms. From this, we

were able to begin to plan some ideas for the first phase of the project. Together we built on the mandated curriculum outcomes and the teachers' individual school and classroom contexts with the aim of developing both authentic and meaningful learning experiences for the students.

The teachers decided a focus on the English curriculum area was most appropriate for their students. Both teachers are required to develop literacy skills within the curriculum strands of reading, writing, talking and listening. Incorporating the iPods within talking and listening experiences would enable purposeful connections between the technology and literacy teaching and learning experiences. Both teachers emphasised the importance of the children becoming "knowing speakers ... as they were exposed to the talking of others beyond their immediate world" and "knowing listeners, listening with both 'inner' and 'outer' ears" (Winch et al., 2001, p. 297). Within the literature, this is presented as an area requiring additional consideration in many classrooms. A unit of work centred on the deconstruction and creation of radio plays was developed. Five key focus areas for the students to engage with were incorporated: investigation and deconstruction of oral texts; exploration of the parts of a radio show; creation of the parts of a radio show; putting together the class radio show; and evaluation of the radio show.

In the implementation of this unit of work, both teachers were conscious that in their classrooms they weren't "teaching iPods", instead the aim was for the seamless integration of the tool to support student learning. The teachers both identified that initially there needed to be some emphasis on teaching about specific features and explicit modeling of how to physically use the tools. Mid-way through the unit, one of the teachers commented, "they [the children] focus on the technological side of things a lot rather than the language features of the audio text". This was further supported by interviews conducted with the students where a consistent theme was the children identifying specific features and capabilities of the iPods rather than how they supported the creation of the radio show.

Throughout the implementation of the unit, there were numerous technological 'hitches' that we were forced to overcome. For the teachers, having a partnership with researchers provided them with support to deal with these issues as they arose and the team became co-learners as they worked together to solve problems as they emerged. The types of problems varied from the repercussions of different versions of applications on classroom computers to using downloaded sound files in various formats

Both researchers were able to have considerable presence in each of the classrooms as they visited for periods of observation, demonstration, to conduct interviews and talk with students and parents. In addition, a listserv was developed to provide a forum for the team to talk to each other where questions were raised and observations shared.

What we have learned so far

As we write, the project is in its neophyte implementation stage. We have been actively meeting as a team; sharing expertise, voicing concerns, planning for implementation and identifying future directions. After the first ten-week focus that has been implemented in classrooms and from talking with the children in the semi-structured interviews, they appear to enjoy the time that they spend using the iPods and have made significant learning gains within the talking and listening strand of their English curriculum. As a team we have learned some valuable lessons. Each of our involvement with the project, the shared vision and trials with the actualisation of this has been wrought with excitement, frustration and many tense conversations. We have learned the importance of open and continued communication between contexts and the necessity for each of us to be active co-learners throughout the project.

There has been considerable learning for all team members. The teachers report they have learned a lot about the technology and this learning curve was steep with regard to the file distribution system and the preparation of files to be used in class. The majority of postings to the listserv were focused on such issues. The teachers also report they have learned more about the way their students learn within varying settings and experiences. For example, once the students had created, recorded and edited their first oral text they were all provided with opportunity to share this with a peer external to the group they had worked with in the text construction. This provided opportunity for students to share their work and peer tutor others about the iPods and the process they engaged with. One teacher described that some of the students in that class had opportunity to tutor another teacher – he describes the teacher, "helped in the conferencing part and acted as one of the children in providing feedback and asking clarifying questions".

Students were found to be articulate about the capabilities of the iPods and how they could use them to support their learning. Students were keen to use the personal on-demand aspects of the iPod when they felt the need in class, especially when assignment directions were delivered via audio file. The opportunity to listen to the directions repeatedly rather than ask multiple questions of the teacher in front of the whole class provided evidence they were adapting their learning processes to fit within the educational environment they found themselves in.

This paper provides example of how we have collaborated to incorporate iPods into classroom learning experiences. Our ongoing partnership has supported the incorporation of this technology within meaningful and authentic experiences to support student learning. In the presentation of the paper we will be able to share further researcher observations, teacher reflection and student work product. While there are many recommendations within the literature surrounding school/university partnerships we have discovered how unique and rewarding partnerships can be.

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Author contact details

Lisa Kervin and **Doug Reid**, Faculty of Education, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW 2500, Australia. Email: {lkervin | doug_reid}@uow.edu.au.

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