

iPads, Coffee and Cake: Becoming experts together

Informal learning with iPads at the University of Southampton

Fiona Harvey & Tamsyn Smith

Centre for Innovation in Technologies and Education (CITE)

University of Southampton

Email: Fiona.Harvey@soton.ac.uk

Email : T.M.Smith@soton.ac.uk

Tel : +44 2380 594421

Mobile : 07970 189221

Abstract

The iPad (& Alternative Devices) Coffee Club has successfully brought together an informal support structure for individuals who are interested in using iPads within their academic and professional working lives at the University of Southampton. This paper specifically looks at the informal environment for the adoption of this technology and refers to how, despite the university not specifically having an implementation policy, the iPad has become the most popular tablet used by academics and professional service staff. A mixed-methods approach was undertaken to identify the impact that these events were having on staff and students professional and personal lives. Information we obtained allowed us to gather feedback to make changes to the existing structure. The monthly sessions are based around social, informal learning and this paper provides detail on how they have been organised and developed, discussing additional support and concludes that the informal network could be developed nationally to provide a network of Coffee Clubs to enable staff and students to become experts together.

Keywords: *informal learning; mobile learning; social learning; change management; skills development; digital literacies;*

Introduction

The Centre for Innovation in Technologies and Education (CITE) at the University of Southampton, is a relatively new unit created in 2011 to support the development and enhancement of educational technology and innovation across the University. CITE is led by Professor Hugh Davis and its staff supports academics across the University to engage with technology to enhance the student education experience.

One of the themes of the Centre is Digital Literacies, as defined by JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee) in their report (Beetham, McGill, & Littlejohn, 2009) Learning Literacies for the Digital Age. “Digital literacy defines those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society”

In order to support the development of Digital Literacies, CITE has created a series of initiatives that allow staff and students to be supported in their digital literacies development. One of these initiatives is the iPad & Alternative Devices (iPAD) Coffee Club.

Context

The idea for a Coffee Club was in part related to a visit that Fiona Harvey (Education Development Manager, CITE) had made to the International Office team who had requested support for their iPads as they were issued with them and needed to use their devices effectively when travelling abroad. When offering them advice and support that it became apparent that they were benefitting more from discussions between themselves, rather than by watching a demonstration.

The International Office was not alone. Across the University departments and academic units were purchasing devices to be used for academic and administration services. There is no policy at the University for supporting any one device but the use of iPads has become, by far, the most popular device on campuses. Since 2010, over 840 iPads have been purchased centrally for faculties and professional services. As all IT equipment must be purchased centrally through the iSolutions (IT Support) Department, establishing an accurate figure has been relatively easy. The

data available does not include purchases made via funds within faculties through 'services rendered funds'.

With such diverse and widespread use of iPads across the University it was clear that there needed to be a level of engagement with this growing community to share good practice and to develop this enthusiasm for digital technology in a supported and informed way, and in turn, furthering the digital literacies skills of the University. The aim was to bring together the expertise of the 'early adopters' with the 'late majority' (Geoghegan, 1994) those who had devices and felt that they were underutilising them. It was also hoped that by offering an informal social space, (Straub, 2009) it would ease the successful adoption of iPads by those who had been given them as part of their practice.

Informal learning

There have been numerous projects on the use of iPads in Higher Education, many of them focussing on the efficacy of iPads for education, in terms of ease of use, accessibility, cost and application (Gawelek, Spataro, & Komarny, 2011; Wagoner, Hoover, & Ernst, 2011 and Murphy, 2011). These factors are clearly one of the key reasons for such widespread take up amongst the education community. The first iPad was released in April 2010 and since then the use of iPads in education gathered momentum, so that by October 2010, it could be argued that the iPad was at the peak of Gartner's hype cycle (Gartner, 2013). Initial consumer expectations were that people would be able to replace their computer or laptop with an iPad, which led to the 'trough of disillusionment' as purchasers realised that their iPad did not have all of the functionality of their desktop PC. However, we have now moved onto 'enlightenment' as users have realised that iPads are not designed to replace

computers, but are a useful supplementary tool with additional functionality that makes them good for specific tasks in relation to their portability, the inclusion of a camera and the range of apps available. This is now leading towards a plateau of productivity for many users as they work out which tasks are better suited to their device and which are better performed on a computer (Macography, 2013). Initial training has revealed that many people find the devices are relatively simple to use, but they need a change of mind-set to be able to use them effectively, instead of seeing them as a replacement for a computer.

In order to enable this change of mind-set it is important to create the right conditions for any technology to become adopted by the mainstream. Educational technology has notoriously been affected by a general discomfort in its use and also by a lack of confidence (Geoghegan, 1994). iPads have been able to address this by allowing early adopters to become familiarised with them in a personalised space, allowing the freedom for development by the users and thus creating the right conditions for experimentation in a more professional environment (Andzenge & North, 2013). This has allowed the adoption through diffusion, over time (since 2010) has meant these devices have become part of many peoples social framework (Straub, 2009).

A natural step towards supporting the use of m-Learning (Crompton, 2013) is by Informal Learning. The latest New Media Horizons Report notes that the skills gained via Informal Learning is valued more than the skills acquired through universities. (New Media Consortium and Educause, 2013) Informal Learning is not new and has been part of lifelong learning research. In particular, 'learning beyond the classroom' (Bentley, 1998) amongst many others. Learning in this way is not independent of community and social learning has played a significant part in the

past over choosing which technologies to use and how to use them. (Ellison & Fudenburg, 1993).

Research design

The process for setting up the Coffee Club is very simple. The Coffee Clubs are deliberately located in relaxed social areas at the University. The Coffee Clubs will be operating on all campuses (by January 2014) and to a very similar pattern. Using the catering facilities available, participants at the Coffee Clubs meet at the designated time, sitting together they use the time to chat about the devices that they own and how they have been using apps for a variety of tasks, including their own productivity, teaching and research. Refreshments are available via the locations of the Coffee Clubs (usually either a café or bar) with the cost subsidised by CITE.

There is deliberately, no set pattern for the discussions. The Clubs meet once a month for 90 minutes and members are invited to 'drop in' as they are able.

Members of CITE come along to the Coffee Clubs and ensure that they are available within the groups that form. By not having a set 'lecture' or 'workshop' the forum is open for all levels and all abilities to sit and listen, or actively ask questions about issues or ideas that they have relating to teaching with devices, researching or questions around their own administrative tasks.

Methodology and Results

For this paper we have reviewed data collected on attendees between October 2012 and June 2013 and used a mixed methods design to identify areas of success and to ascertain areas for development. Between October 2012 and June 2013, nearly 100

visits (N=97; Female 56%; Male 43) were made to the Coffee Clubs at the main campus. Attendees to the sessions were a range of academic and support staff, from Senior Academics (Professorial level and above) to junior staff. Students who attended were mainly, PhD level with two Undergraduates. This is fairly representative of the education community at the University. The Coffee Club is completely open for any member of staff, student or local community. The Coffee Clubs have been requested in all the University campuses and so new Coffee Clubs have been organised for our ocean front campus, the National Oceanography Centre Southampton (NOCS), Winchester School of Art (WSA), Southampton General Hospital (SGH) and Avenue Campus.

We used the data that we have collected through the registration system Eventbrite (<http://www.eventbrite.com>) for attendance at the Coffee Clubs to establish details about our attendees (n=67, Male =28, Female = 41). We have also gathered anonymous feedback from those who have attended via our internal survey system, iSurvey (n=19 gender not included). This online questionnaire comprised of six open ended questions, giving us a rich selection of ideas and improvements for future Coffee Clubs. Other data was gathered via the evaluations of the training sessions. Using thematic analysis, this data provided us with a clear indication that the use of informal learning methods was having a positive impact on productivity and the professional lives of those who attended. Again, this feedback has influenced the format and locations of the Coffee Clubs.

Feedback from the attendees of the Coffee Clubs has been very positive. The attendees of a recent Coffee Club indicated that over 86% said that it had had an positive impact on their professional life and that would like to see similar kinds of initiatives across the university.

Examples of participants comments:

“It has raised awareness of how devices might be used with groups of students. It has increased my efficiency and effectiveness at using my own device for academic purposes. It has allowed me to network with people from different faculties so is spreading best practice on using technology for academic purposes.” (anonymous participant, Academic staff).

“Colleagues have helped me make a better use of my ipad for productivity by highlighting useful apps and tips for interacting with the device (hand gestures etc) (anonymous participant, Academic support staff).

“I learnt so much about how to use my ipad for work particularly setting it up to connect to the M drive!” (anonymous participant, Academic support staff).

The result of this kind of environment has allowed the community to work in partnership and become ‘experts together’, each identifying ideas and apps that they have knowledge about and sharing them between each other.

Discussion

The concept of social learning is nothing new and places an emphasis on observational learning. (Bandura, 1971). The iPad Coffee Clubs have been based around the ideas of social, informal learning. They have aimed to develop the competences and digital literacies skills of them for their own productivity and practice which has in a steady increase in the amount of iPads in use at the University. This enthusiasm for iPads could be attributed to the suggestion that ‘adoption is innately social, influenced by peers, change agents, organisational pressure and societal norms’ (Rogers cited in Straub, 2009). All of these factors are

present, certainly socialisation, change agents, in the guise of CITE staff and colleagues enthusing over their own use of the technology.

They were not deliberately designed to be just for iPads but this has been the focus of discussions around apps and usage. The iPad has proved to be easy to use, require very little 'training' in terms of demonstrations of functional usage. The set up is very easy and they continue to evolve to be extremely reliable, user friendly and through the Apple community, offer high quality support for education. In this context it is easy to see why the iPads have been so popular, and continue to be popular with the education community. (Teach Thought, 2013)

The Coffee Club has created a vibrant community across the University of enthusiastic users of technology. Staff have been encouraged by each others activities with their iPads and have become creative, using apps with their cohorts. In October 2013, our newly created 'Life Lab' an outreach centre at our Southampton General Hospital Campus (<http://www.southampton.ac.uk/medicine/outreach/index.page>) operated between the Faculty of Medicine and the Education School has been furnished with 32 iPads for use with local school children. This was a direct result of the support offered through the Coffee Clubs as the team were able to evaluate the usefulness of the iPads against their own skills using the devices.

The range of staff and students that have attended the Coffee Clubs has been diverse.

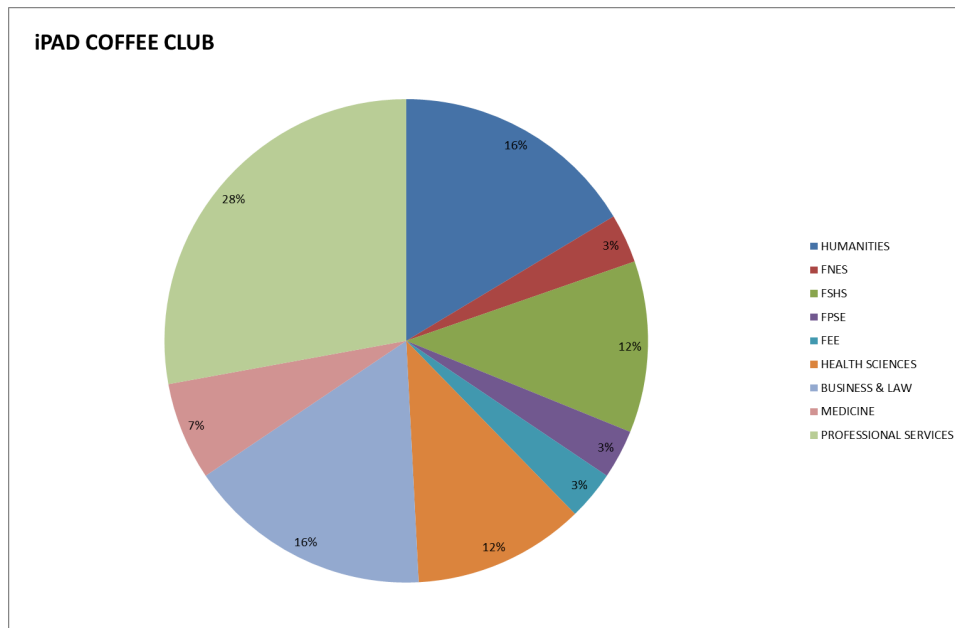


Figure 1 Attendees by Faculty (FNES – Natural & Earth Sciences; FSHS – Social & Human Sciences; Physical Sciences & Engineering; FEE- Engineering & the Environment)

Members of iSolutions (our IT support service) have come along to the Coffee Club and offered their advice around accessing University systems. This has been particularly advantageous for them as they have been able to break free from the usual weighty bureaucratic process that is in place for formal support. By attending these Coffee Clubs they have been able to demonstrate the ‘human face’ of IT support and it has been greatly appreciated by members of the Coffee Club.

Further support

Through the Coffee Club there has been additional ‘formalised support’. This has evolved out of the ideas and discussions during the Coffee Clubs. Sessions have been arranged on the main campus (Highfield) for workshop type sessions where colleagues are able to view how a few specific apps can be used. The apps that are discussed are those which have been introduced to members of the Coffee Clubs. These could be anything that the members have found useful and wanted to share. These occur two weeks after the Coffee Club for one hour and are led by CITE staff.

Although, it is our intention that any member of the Coffee Club can demonstrate their favourite or most useful app. This addition to our Coffee Club offer is in the very early stages and will be adapted and developed as we continue to evaluate.

In terms of additional support for iPads and as a direct result of our Coffee Club we have been able to offer a three day workshop for all academic staff via Apple Distinguished Instructor, Joe Moretti. This was arranged by our area Higher Education lead for Apple, Lawrence Stephenson. This was an important workshop for us, as it allowed staff to be guided through the use of a range of apps for teaching. Staff were not only able to develop their skills but they were also inspired and enthused. Over 50 academic staff attended the sessions over three days, including the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Education and other senior academics. 73% of those who attended had been to one or more Coffee Clubs and 80% said that they would use the ideas that they had been shown in their professional work at the University. CITE staff ensured that this enthusiasm was carried through to the next Coffee Club so that staff unable to attend were able to benefit from the experiences of those who were able to attend.

Future plans

CITE have already increased their Coffee Clubs to start at all campuses from January 2014. Coffee Clubs have been organised for:

- Winchester School of Art
- National Oceanography Centre Southampton (NOCS)
- Southampton General Hospital (SGH)

- Avenue Campus

Much of the success of the Coffee Clubs has been due to the attendance by CITE staff to initiate discussion as knowledgeable 'enthusiasts' and so it is important for the other coffee clubs to be facilitated in the same way. CITE has identified Champions in each of the campuses to be the point of contact and to ensure that the experiences from the Highfield Campus are mirrored for these campuses. This has worked with some success already at the Avenue Campus. Initially, the Avenue Campus Coffee Club was led by an academic, who specifically looked at apps with a Humanities, bias. The academic is now on Sabbatical and so a new champion has been identified thus ensuring continuity. Members of CITE staff will also attend these Coffee Clubs to provide a link between each of the events.

As part of the Higher Education Academy (HEA) Changing the Learning Landscape series of events, the Coffee Clubs were presented along with other Digital Literacies initiatives from the University of Southampton at a workshop in London. As a result of this, it is hoped that other universities will adopt this model and offer similar informal sessions at their institutions. To date, start-up funding has been offered to University of Huddersfield, Olajo Aiyegbayo visited the University of Southampton Coffee Club in November 2013. Likewise, an informal discussion with Learning Technologists in Library & Learning Support at Bournemouth University has resulted in the creation of 'Tablet Talk' - informal lunchtime 'get togethers' where staff can share their discussions and good practice on the use of mobile devices. It is hoped that we can work together and form a community, sharing experiences, research and guidance on best practice.

Future research should involve the impact that the Coffee Clubs have had on the use of technology for education across campuses and we should be able to compare this with other institutions who adopt the Coffee Club model.

In conclusion, informality is the key to the development and enhancement of skills for using iPads within both academic and administrative capacity. By having the right environment for support, attendees to the Coffee Club have commented that they feel they have been able to experiment without feeling that they would be intimidated by others there, unlike in formal 'training' settings where structured activities have meant that varying levels of ability have either slowed down or gone too fast for some individuals. The Coffee Club has become a vibrant and active community of learners and in addition, a by-product of the informal setting has been that further links have been created for other projects within the university, cementing networks and raising the profile of CITE to academics and services who may have been unaware of the support and services that are available.

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