Mobile Teaching and Learning Research Project: MLIS Focus Group Summary

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JANUARY 2011

OVERVIEW

The mobile teaching and learning research project aims to gather information about potential applications of mobile devices for teaching and learning activities. The information gained will help inform how aggressively UW Information Technology (UW-IT) should pursue development and integrating mobile applications that support teaching and learning, as well as provide direction for the types of applications that would be the most useful for students and instructors. In Autumn Quarter 2010 we launched the project by conducting focus groups with distance education students in the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program. Since this population receives all course information and conducts all course activities online, we hypothesized that they would have a greater need to use mobile devices to support their learning than students whose courses are primarily face-to-face. Thus, they represent a useful starting population for this project.

METHODS

During Autumn Quarter 2010, we recruited second-year MLIS students to participate in our study. Eight students total attended two focus groups. Five students participated in an in-person group, which met on the UW Seattle campus following the MLIS orientation for incoming students. (Some second-year students were on campus to assist with orientation; others came to campus specifically for the focus group). In addition, we held a remote focus group with three participants using Adobe Connect.

Each focus group began with a series of questions asking participants about their typical tasks and workflow for a specific course. Next, we asked about the challenges they faced in the course and how technology (in general) could potentially help overcome those challenges, either through the use of new tools, through the addition of new features to existing tools, or by implementing new teaching practices for using tools. Once this framework was established, we asked how, if at all, mobile devices and applications could address the challenges students had listed.

KEY THEMES

Most of the challenges and solutions discussed in focus groups did not highlight a direct need for specific mobile applications, although some of the issues raised could potentially be addressed through the development of new applications, through the institution of new teaching practices, or by making existing tools easier to use on mobile devices. The main themes that emerged in focus groups included:

(1) Improved Organization, Notification, and Personal Options in Catalyst GoPost: GoPost is the primary means of communication and discussion in MLIS online courses. Since students rely heavily on this tool, they had a lot to share about effective and ineffective teaching practices with GoPost, as well as ideas for improving the tool. Most important, how well an instructor organizes and maintains a discussion board makes a huge difference in ease of navigating the content. A poorly-organized GoPost can make the class very challenging for students, since they do not know what discussions they should be following or where to find information.

The primary need students voiced in both focus groups was for better notifications in GoPost. They wanted to know if someone had replied to their post directly or had contributed to a specific discussion they were following, rather than general notifications about new posts. If notifications were more specific (and personal), then it would be easier for students to quickly participate on the board throughout the day, from a computer or mobile device. Students also wanted to be able to impose their own organization on the board by tagging posts. Some also had interest in being able to "like" or rate a post.

(2) Downloading Lecture Audio and Slides: Students wanted easier options for downloading lectures and slides so that they could access and review them from any device at any time. In particular they wanted the ability to listen to lectures on their mobile devices during commutes. In this context, downloading content would work better than streaming it online, since students reported inconsistent Internet access. A couple of students had managed to download audio of lectures, but would have preferred having the slides available as well. In terms of teaching practice, slides should be formatted to be mobile-friendly, mainly by having minimal information on each slide, so they can be read more easily on a small screen.

(3) Streamlining Authentication: One of the challenges students face is the need to authenticate multiple times during a work session as they access different tools. This can be particularly frustrating on a mobile device. Tools intended to be used from mobile devices should leverage UW Web login to minimize this problem. This may also point to the need for UW to provide better support for authentication from native mobile applications.

(4) Pedagogical Changes: Several of the solutions students suggested were pedagogical, rather than technological. Primarily they observed that online courses can be isolating, and that the instructor's level of involvement in discussion boards and availability for personal correspondence (by email) or conferences (by Skype or chat) made a significant difference in students' experience of the course. In particular, in courses where a lot of theoretical material was discussed, it could be challenging to keep up with the class if students do not have sufficient opportunities to get clarification on concepts from the instructor (some prefer private exchanges versus public forums for these interactions). Also, how the instructor organizes the course materials and discussion boards has a big impact on students' experience of a course.

NEXT STEPS

We intend to share this summary and relevant data with groups involved in GoPost development and authentication services. The MLIS program has representation on this project team and will also consider the issues raised, both technical and pedagogical, in regards to the development and support of the program. Going forward, we plan to conduct focus groups with additional populations of students in Winter and/or Spring Quarters in 2011. In addition to talking with students about their current needs, we wish to identify and interview innovators on campus who are developing applications or imagining new opportunities for the use of mobile devices to support teaching and learning.