Students at university have mobile technologies. Do they do m-learning?

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Introduction

Freshmen at our university in Argentina have mobile technologies (MT) with Internet access, and they use them in everyday life. By means of these technologies, it may be supposed that they access to resources related to their university studies. Therefore, it can be considered that the facts of having mobile devices and having Internet access combined together lead themselves to m-learning scenarios, the so-called mobile learning.

We ask questions such as “which tasks do faculty assign to students?”, “Which academic activities do students do with their MT, further than the ones that teachers ask them to do?”, “What time-management skills do students have to fulfill the assigned tasks across contexts of everyday life?”. Finally, related to this last question, “What kind of training or guidance have they received from their mentors?”

Methodology

Data used for the analysis were gathered within the research project “Mobile Technologies at the University. Social Practices, Challenges and Opportunities in the First Year of University”, framed within the tradition that attempts to understand social phenomena. That is the reason why constructing data techniques was selected so as to let students express their own assumption and analyze their social practices, without the goal of covering all of them nor generalizing the results. The tools selected were semi-open surveys to students and faculty, semi-structured interviews to faculty and finally focus groups with students. These data were later triangulated with each other and with usage statistics of the computer laboratories of the institution, so as to understand the social processes linked to the object of study, and enrich the analysis with the combination of different approaches from the acknowledgement of the diverse perspectives that converge in the present research.

Results

Within the framework of our research, we became aware that audiovisual language was strongly considered when searching and selecting information sources. It emerged from the interviews that, as part of their academic tasks, an increasing number of students search and find in YouTube answers to many of the questions that arise in class. Also, some students record the lessons delivered at university by their own initiative, so as to listen to them later. These examples show that they expect their teachers to provide them with this type of material: audiovisual support portable on their MT that, according to the interviews carried out and some comments included in the surveys, is the way they choose to access knowledge. This is another example of the gap between the social practices that students really do and what their teachers imagine. This preference for videos is undetected by most faculty.

They believe that what students know about the use of computers also includes the necessary skills for the search of information, but they don’t record the students’ preference for the audiovisual language. Consequently, most of the sources of information that are published or recommended are textual, on paper or printable media.

Conclusion

Students use their mobile technologies for studying, despite the absence of their teachers’ assignment. While this fact could be seen as a consequence of the social practices they carry out outside the classroom, it can’t be considered as a learning practice related to the use of the devices. As we said before, it would be interesting to design teacher training instances and ways of pedagogical support for teachers to recognize the ways of learning of the new subjects, and thus tap the potential of new mobile equipment inside and outside the classroom. Teachers should be strengthened in the constructions of tasks where MT are effective tools for collaborative, flexible, spontaneous, informal, and based-on-problem-resolution learning.

Although audiovisual language has turned to be young people’s favorite tool when they try to gather information, academics don’t offer it as an option. We think that the use of this language appears as an opportunity for promoting the use of mobile technologies for academic purposes. Therefore, from this year on, we have rearranged our investigation focusing on the use of audiovisual resources.