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Information literacy gets mobile in Vancouver

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Abstract

Two international m-Libraries Conferences have now highlighted how libraries are promoting the use of mobile devices. This is a short account of how our information literacy delivery may change thanks to mobile technology.

Keywords

Information literacy; mobiles

Mobiles are everywhere!

“Mobile communication has been more widely adopted more quickly than any other technology ever” (Dempsey 2008, p. xxv). The most common items carried around are keys, money and a mobile phone. This offers huge opportunities to communicate with our users in new ways. By the end of 2008, there were over 4 billion mobile subscriptions worldwide, which represents 61% of the population and there were 335 million broadband subscribers. By contrast, just under a quarter of the world population of 6.7 billion use the internet (International Telecommunication Union 2009). The ECAR study 2008 in the USA (Salaway et al. 2008, p. 26) found that from the sample of 27,317 students 66.1% had internet-capable cellphones and of these 25.9% access the internet once a week or more. In 2007 14% accessed the internet on a mobile device on a typical day and 32% had never used the internet on a mobile at any time. This had grown in 2009 to 23% and 38% respectively (Horrigan 2009, p. 15).

I attended the first m-Libraries Conference held in November 2007 at the Open University in Milton Keynes, UK. The theme of 24/7 availability wherever and whenever our users want and the possibilities this gives libraries was the theme explored at this conference. “This is the yet unrealised potential of computing ubiquity and the library” (Hahn 2008, p. 278). One of the workshops was led by Jo Parker (Open University) and myself, in which we shared ideas for delivering information literacy (IL) on the move, via mobile devices (Godwin et al. 2008). Since then Jo and I launched our book “Information Literacy meets Library 2.0” (Godwin and Parker 2008), which contained case studies of innovative delivery of IL. The mobile platform seemed a logical topic to research following from this publication, so I soon submitted a proposal for the Second m-Libraries Conference in Vancouver. I also delivered a similar short paper “Information

literacy meets the Mobile Web” in April 2009 at LILAC in Cardiff. We shall see in the following discussion that this is a new area, reminiscent of Web 2.0 in its earlier days, and like trying to hit a moving target, or even several targets. The m-Libraries Conference is international and the decision to go to Canada was prompted by the partner institutional organiser being Athabasca University. This was bound to limit the number of UK delegates and I was very grateful for some financial support from the CILIP ISC IL Group, SCONUL and my own University of Bedfordshire. I am pleased to say that the rate of exchange with the Canadian dollar was considerably better than with the Euro!

How does this relate to information literacy?

How does the mobile revolution fit in with information literacy? In this section we shall see there are some new additions as well as mobile versions of web content that were discussed at the second m-Libraries Conference. Some Web 2.0 tools were also promotional and the dividing line between promotion and delivery of IL was sometimes quite slim. With mobiles the promotional side may be in the forefront at present. With the development of the iPhone and other smartphones there is now less need for web sites to have special mobile versions. For example the iPhone can deal successfully with many web pages by the ability to enlarge these at will.

Limitations

Before we become too enthusiastic about mobile use it is important to recognise that the variety of devices poses a serious challenge. PDAs, cell phones, Blackberries, iPods, iTouch, iPhones and other high level phones exhibit different characteristics and do not deliver the same amount of content. Also the cost of access can be a barrier. Whilst the transitional character of this technology cannot be ignored, it should not deter us from looking at the possibilities and experimenting where possible, both at the lower and higher end of the spectrum of mobile devices.

Making IL mobile

The following discussion explores both the delivery of information via mobile devices and new tools which could be used in the delivery of IL.

- Mobile sites. Provision of a mobile interface of an existing library web site was a starting point for some libraries, for example, Mobilib at NCSU Library. This gave the potential of new outreach and a way of engaging users. Some other notable libraries who have chosen this route are Duke University and Washington DC Public Library. Databases are sometimes being given special mobile-friendly versions which are easier to navigate and access for example Westlaw and PubMed. RefWorks is now available on mobiles using RefMobile on a smart phone, mobile or PDA. Loyola University in Chicago, for example, recommends this to their students.

- Tours. These are beginning to employ mobile devices rather than the proprietary devices often used in museums. Audio tours of the Headington and Wheatley sites at Oxford Brookes University can be downloaded for use on any mp3 player. In the USA Temple University in Philadelphia are offering cell phone tours.
- Reference help. Reference desks using SMS texting are being tested in many libraries, and could be regarded as an example of IL individual help or tuition. For a long list of libraries (mainly in the USA) offering SMS reference services see the Library Success: a best practices wiki at <http://www.libsuccess.org/>. A project with librarians using handhelds for reference service support has been trialled at Penn State University. The Fujitsu Lifebook was the preferred device out of the various handhelds tested to provide support on the campus. The main advantage of this service was the extra dimension it gave to the roving help on campus with a variety of online tasks (Cahoy et al. 2008).
- Screencasting, podcasting and vodcasting. These are becoming more common in the delivery of IL by librarians and their use on mobile devices is a natural extension. Users like to learn in small bursts, whenever and wherever they choose, so the chance to create short broadcasts should be seized. Examples of these include Hannon Library at Southern Oregon University in Ashland, Oregon and Washington State University. Arizona State University have a Faculty Workshop series on the ASU Library channel on iTunes.
- Personal Response Systems (PRS). There is increasing interest in the use of PRS to test comprehension of lectures or gather opinion in classrooms. Poll software at various skill levels is available for use on many handheld devices which could be used instead of requiring Keypad clickers. Poll Everywhere is a notable example and was used by Toni Twiss during her project in New Zealand (Twiss 2008). Schools in the USA which cannot afford expensive clickers are experimenting with Poll Everywhere as a cheaper alternative using student mobiles (Learn 2009).
- Twitter. The Twitter special account for communicating with a special group, or simply as a library site for current awareness, tips, information flow, reference help and instruction and teaching IL online is being tried at Santa Barbara City College, California (Neufeld 2009).
- QR codes. This enables text or a phone number or a URL to be encoded and given a special two-dimensional barcode. There are a number of free services for doing this on the web for example BeeTag and Neoreader. Most phones in Japan already have a QR reader installed. Alternatively free software e.g. BeeTag, Neoreader, can be downloaded to mobile phones. Andrew Walsh (2009) describes the possibilities of using this technology in libraries while at the same time he presents the limitations of this approach. At present, knowledge of QR codes is not widespread in higher education as can be seen from the study at the University of Bath (Ramsden 2008). We shall be experimenting with this in learning resources at the University of Bedfordshire. YouTube can be watched on the higher end mobile devices and this format is ideal for short tutorials. As with screencasting it will rely on heavy promotion to make an impact.

Into the Future

The variations and capabilities of the devices at present make generalisation difficult. Users may be limited by having text only, slow access speeds, prohibitive access costs, and the need for WiFi. Opinions on usability of even high end machines are not uniform. Nielsen's report (2009) on mobile usability concluded that

“[...] designing for mobile is hard. Technical accessibility is very far from providing an acceptable user experience. It's not enough that your site will display on a phone. Even touch phones that offer "full-featured" browsers don't offer PC-level usability in terms of users' ability to actually get things done on a website”.

On the other hand, we can expect prices of devices and of access to come down eventually. Great rewards may await the early adopters who pioneer mobile delivery of IL to their users.

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