Challenges and Opportunities: Making Mobile Learning a Reality in Schools

Keri Facer, NESTA futurelab, Bristol, United Kingdom

Fern Faux, Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, United Kingdom

Angela McFarlane, Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, United Kingdom

This paper explores ways in which the provision of ubiquitous computing impacts on teaching and learning, through a case study of a major initiative run by a local education authority in the UK. Students and staff across 8 schools (including primary, secondary special and mainstream secondary) have been provided with handheld computers for use at home and school. Previous research suggests that mobile technologies can make a significant impact in supporting teaching and learning (Perry, 2003; Zurita & Nussbaum, 2004); this paper will examine the practical realities of achieving these objectives in diverse educational settings.

The paper considers key technical, managerial and organisational issues arising from this initiative. In particular, we explore factors contributing to or mitigating against the Initiative's aims of achieving innovative models of teaching and learning; a positive engagement with formal education; widening access to technology and changing literacy and numeracy practices. Data for the paper is drawn from interviews, questionnaires, focus groups, observation and students acting as researchers, in a spirit of collaborative enquiry.

This paper will discuss key issues arising to date, exploring ways in which handheld computers facilitate ambient teaching and learning, where teaching agendas must be set against the notion of appropriateness of tool. Initial findings reveal technical difficulties hinder the ubiquitous use of handheld computers, though enthusiasm for the Initiative remains high. Consequently, we will be asking: at what point is it reasonable for both learners and educators to make use of the technology, and at what point does use of the technology become unreasonable?

Keri Facer oversees the research and evaluation activities of Futurelab's learning team. She also commissions and edits the NESTA Futurelab Series of literature reviews, and contributes to the development of the organisation's events programme. Previously, Keri spent four years as researcher and lecturer at Bristol University's Graduate School of Education, where she continues to be a visiting fellow. Here she worked on a range of major innovative research projects, including ESRC projects Screen Play and InterActive Education. She has published widely in the field of children's digital cultures, with a particular focus on how young people use and learn with digital technologies in the home.

Fern Faux, Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, United Kingdom.

Prof. Angela McFarlane, BSc, PhD, PGCE, Professor at the Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol holds a chair in education at the University of Bristol, is a director of the TEEM project on evaluation of digital content in the classroom, and is on the steering committee of the Nesta FutureLab project. She ran a software R&D unit at Homerton College, Cambridge and has experience of educational software development from concept to market. During this time she worked closely on computer based assessment with the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate, to whom she remains an adviser. Her development team created the early prototypes for an online version of IELTS, the high-stakes English language qualification, as well as CommuniCAT, the adaptive test of language skills that won a European Educational Software award. In addition, Angela has designed and directed national research and evaluation projects on ICT and Learning, and was part of the team that designed the longitudinal study of the impact of networked technologies on home and school learning - Impact2. She was a

member of the OECD expert group on quality in educational software and the first Evidence and Practice Director at Becta, the UK government agency for ICT. Current research includes the role of eLearning in professional development, personal and mobile computing and computer games in learning. In 2003 she edited a special issue of Assessment in Education on Assessment for the Digital Age.