

Why mobile technology makes sense in the 21st century classroom

■ Justine Isard

Teaching and learning is in an interesting space right now. We have an abundance of opportunities online and to say we might feel bombarded at times is probably an understatement. With so many choices online, thousands of apps, different tablets on the market, the BYOT (Bring Your Own Technology) debate, and the list goes on. Where do we start when it comes to mobile technology in the classroom and where does it fit, and does it really get results?

First of all mobile technology does have a place in the 21st Century Classroom and yes it does get results. This current generation now dubbed the 'Touch Generation' (due to the surge of tablets in our lives) has been born into a high speed Wi-Fi internet connection where everything seems to be a Google search away and learning via mobile technology is a very natural and organic process. This is mostly because it's very much a part of their lives and when schools embrace this technology the teaching and learning experience becomes more real and relevant.

Research is showing us with experienced and innovative educators driving mobile technology schools will see improved learning outcomes and greater engagement. *Time Magazine* (2012) revealed a study that showed students that used mobile technology (iPads) in the classroom scored better in literacy tests than those that did not. An Oklahoma State University study indicated that 75 per cent of the students in the pilot agreed that the iPad enhanced the learning experience (21st Century Fluency Project, 2012) and it appears students with access to smartphones are studying school related materials more frequently

with approximately 40 minutes more per week than students without access to a smartphone (Digital Trends, 2011).

So why is mobile technology effective in the classroom? The use of mobile devices like iPads taps into students' preferred styles of learning and suits their interests. They are easily accessible and the intuitive nature of mobile technology makes it a real game changer in the classroom. When tablets are embraced in the classroom the learning is less focused on whole class teaching and offers more individual and personalised learning opportunities. It is also less 'teacher' centred and more 'student' centred with them enjoying greater autonomy over their learning. The flexibility of these devices means students can investigate topics further, revisit learning if needed and drive their own learning.

It's also about the opportunities this learning platform creates; there is greater use of social networking which allows for more student voices to be heard, wider audience and deeper reflection. By using social media students and teachers can discuss social networking behaviour, cyber safety and many other 21st century skills essentials.

With all the excitement around the possibilities of mobile technology in schools, we ask ourselves 'Is this the transformation in learning we have been waiting for?' Time will surely tell, but the one thing that remains true is that it is not the technology that makes a lesson or learning exciting, it is the teacher. John Hattie's research and others have found that the effectiveness of the teacher to be the biggest impact on student learning and this has not changed with the influx of devices and apps in our classrooms.

Any educator will tell you when it comes to student learning it's about pedagogy first, technology second. Educators using technology effectively in the classroom will tell you, it's not about getting the mobile device out and saying- 'what are we going to learn today?' It is about educators having a clear vision on the purpose of the teaching and learning experience and how to achieve that outcome. Technology will never overshadow the critical role of the teacher in the classroom; it simply enhances the learning experience.

So what makes mobile technology more special than PCs or laptops? It's not about it being 'more special' as they all have their place, but to me the best technology is the one you have with you. Something that you can easily carry is most likely to be the most accessible and practical. Think about how we take photos these days, for me about 80-90 per cent of the photos are taken on my smartphone because the best camera I have is the one I have with me. The tools we have for learning are really no different and for our students this is even more so. It is almost instinctual to reach for their mobile device to complete an activity or quickly find something out online. For many students this is still not possible because mobile technology is banned at their school and we wonder why some students are disengaged and feel school has no relevance.

The greatest irony in banning a mobile technology in our schools to me is potentially the greatest learning that could happen as a result of allowing it. We want young people to have digital literacy skills, be safe and responsible online, but we are not allowing them to

utilise the technology that will give them the opportunity to learn and to be guided. It is like expecting our young people to be safe and competent drivers on the road, but not allowing them to drive a car. You bet you are opening Pandora's box, but the advantages of teaching these new literacies, digital fluencies, and dealing with some of the negative uses far outweigh the disadvantages. We are wasting time if schools are not addressing these issues within our curriculum and making it a priority - they are 21st century life skills.

From my research schools that are having success with tablets and mobile devices in the classroom have some commonalities.

From this I have put together these tips to support schools in harnessing mobile technology:

- Strong School Leadership
- A School Community with a clear and united vision
- All working towards the same common goal
- A whole school community that encourages risk taking, innovation and experimenting
- That offers colleagues support not judgement
- Resiliency (a healthy environment that promotes positive attitudes in dealing with setbacks)
- Self-education (spending time getting familiar with device capabilities and road-testing)
- Opportunities for teachers to discuss and reflect
- Showcasing and sharing in staff meetings, parent teacher nights, assemblies, online etc

- Open door policy in classrooms- teachers welcome to come into each other's classrooms
- Expertise in schools - go-to people
- Valuing teachers that are giving mobile technology a go in their classroom
- Peer Mentoring -experienced users of mobile technology with less experienced
- Building communities online and with other schools through social networks
- Emphasis on teacher responsibility rather than accountability
- Sustained Professional Development •

Justine Isard is director of MyLearning, based in Melbourne and is currently running conference presentations around Australia on harnessing iPads in the classroom. www.mylearningsite.com.au

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