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Learning with Online and Mobile Technologies

A Student Survival Guide

JANET MACDONALD
and
LINDA CREANOR

GOWER

1 Introduction

I started a new course last year and was wondering how I was going to cope with it all, trying to find the best way to learn all this stuff and terrified when I had to write my first assignment. To me it's just learning, and the fact that it's online as opposed to in a classroom is irrelevant. I suppose I hadn't really given much thought to the technology, I hadn't realised how much it could help.

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Online and mobile technologies have opened up exciting new possibilities for study in higher education, with important opportunities for students. Technology has become a necessary and everyday part of studying. This book starts with effective practice in learning, and shows how technology can support that good practice. We aim to show you the many ways in which online and mobile technologies can be used for study and give you some guidance on how best to use them for learning in higher education, whether that is at college or university, or within your workplace.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

While some students follow a course which is completely online, most students make use of online and mobile technologies alongside their attendance at classes or tutorials, the use of text books, or the discussion of project work over a cup of coffee in classroom or corridor. Recently, the term 'blended learning' has been used to describe learning which takes place online as well as in face-to-face sessions, and that is probably the most common situation for the majority of students.

Some students attend a campus while others will study part time and some study at a distance. In addition to school leavers that includes mature or part-time students, or those undertaking continuous professional development or work-based training. We intend this book

to cater to all these students, whatever their context. We also welcome members of staff as readers who may wish to update their knowledge of the use of technologies in academic study. Whatever background you are starting from, you will have strengths on which you can draw, whether you have studied previously or gained useful experience from everyday life, where the Internet is widely in use.

A note about rapid change

We all know that technology changes rapidly. What is in vogue today may not be popular in a year, or even in six months time, so we have concentrated on basing the advice in this book on what is already known about good practice in effective learning. We are reasonably confident that these principles should remain current even though the technologies may change, and we hope this should provide a good foundation for learning with technologies which have yet to appear.

WHY WE HAVE WRITTEN THIS BOOK

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We have written this book because online and mobile technologies are now widespread in higher education and as a student it is important for you to know how to use them to support your learning. Technology plays a central role in most universities and colleges. Computers are widely in use by students and staff to access online resources and communicate with each other, and mobile technologies are also increasingly used for education, providing additional flexibility in study routines and an alternative way to access the Internet or communicate with fellow students.

Strengths of digital everything

One of the great strengths of online and mobile technologies is their potential to operate together for communicating, saving, editing or sharing information and resources. For example, you might use your mobile phone to record an audio clip, upload it to your computer and then attach it to an email to send to a friend, or perhaps post it on a social networking site to introduce yourself to fellow students. You might access a website from your computer, summarise the content in a word-processed document, incorporate it into your next assignment, and finally add photos you have uploaded from your camera. You then email the assignment to your tutor, and save the file to return to for revision purposes. Or you might download a podcast from your course website and then transfer it to an MP3 player, to play while you are travelling or exercising. Once information is in digital form it can be saved, edited, merged, or shared in many different ways.

These technologies also allow you to work at your own pace whether you need flexibility in time or in location, of particular importance if you are a part-time student. Technology might be used for delivery of content in the form of downloadable handouts, or whole course units, or podcasts on topics of interest. It can also be used for communication and dialogue, offering an alternative approach to learning in a conventional classroom.

Lifelong learning and you

We believe that the issues and good practice which we describe in this book will be relevant to you, not only in your course but in whatever learning situation you subsequently find yourself. People have always undertaken learning in a wide variety of circumstances in every day life, whether to find out how to bring up children, or to learn how to cope with new situations at work, or to contribute to the community. The term 'lifelong learning' has become a by-word today, and you will need to keep learning throughout life, whether or not you attend a formal course.

The use of technology has become an integral part of lifelong learning, and so have new approaches to learning which are particularly relevant to study through life. For example, the flexibility and greater choices possible when using online technologies for study mean that you will learn to be much more disciplined about time management than you would if you were only attending regular classes. You will develop independence and self-direction, so that when faced with a bewildering choice of web-based resources you are confident about how much to read, and when to stop. You will also need self-motivation if you are less dependent on class contact time to keep on top of study routines. As an effective lifelong learner you will learn not only the appropriate use of technologies, but also develop a self-disciplined and critical approach to study. So we believe that many of the approaches, skills and techniques which we talk about in this book will be of value to you not only in your formal course of study, but also in any other learning you might wish to undertake in future. In an increasingly competitive job market this will also be attractive to prospective employers.

Technology use is not an end in itself

Finally it is worth remembering that while technology can facilitate lifelong learning, it does not guarantee that learning will take place. The opportunities to develop independent or collaborative learning through a course can be supported by technology, but this will not work effectively unless the course is designed to support learning in new ways. While the extensive resources on the web provide knowledge and information which can easily be kept up to date, they are of little use to those who

do not have reliable access to the Internet, and can instead deepen the divide between those with access and those without. On the other hand, communication technologies can also bridge divides by allowing contact between fellow students regardless of geography, disability or family responsibilities.

WHAT THIS BOOK CONTAINS

We hope you will read this book from cover to cover, but being realistic we recognise that some chapters will be of more interest and relevance to some of you than others. Here is an overview to give you a flavour of what each part of the book contains. What you read will depend on who you are, and what you know already. For these reasons, the chapters in this book will encourage you to draw on relevant previous experience in focusing on the process of learning: when considering why technologies will help, how and when.

We thought this book should draw on students' experiences, so that readers have a real sense that others have 'been there' and not only survived but derived positive benefit from using digital technologies for study. Their experiences underline the fact that studying using online or mobile technologies does not rely simply on technological skills, but draws on a range of abilities. In Chapter 2, *Student voices* we describe students with a diversity of backgrounds who came to be using technologies at colleges and universities. You may recognise experiences similar to your own, or perhaps gain confidence from seeing that you are not alone in thinking that you lack the necessary abilities.

You may wonder whether any study that requires online access will fit into your life, or perhaps feel anxious about basic skills in using a computer. For those who are starting from scratch and plan to get up to speed sufficiently with technology to feel comfortable about attending college or university at all, Chapter 3, *Practicalities* gives you some basic advice on the bottom line: the skills and equipment you need to get organised.

The rest of the book covers the processes of study in four closely related areas, as we illustrate in this diagram. In each of the four areas the chapters are written in pairs: describing first how online and mobile technologies are used in higher education, and then secondly providing a survival guide to good practice. The paragraphs which follow tell you more about the contents of each chapter.

If you start study in a new subject area or have been out of full-time education for some time then you may feel anxious when confronted

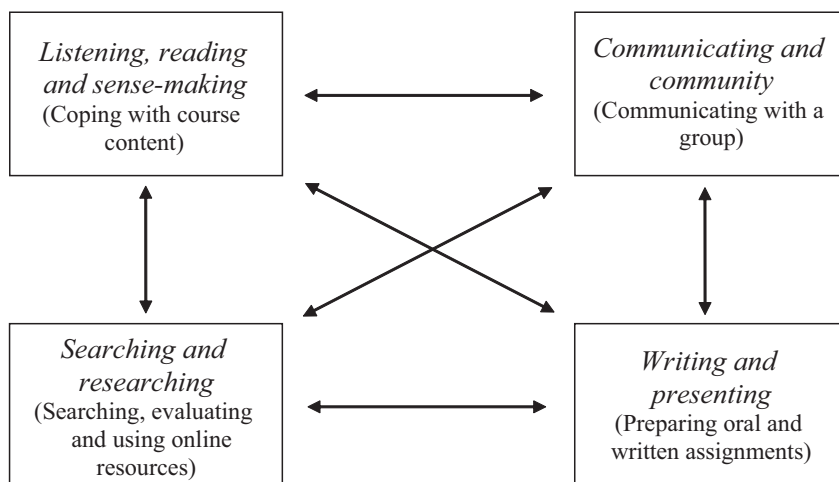


Figure 1.1 Studying with online and mobile technologies

with knowledge which is new and unfamiliar, in a language which can be rather alienating. Chapters 4 and 5 discuss *Listening, reading and sense-making*, in other words the processes which you go through when you are grappling with course content. We describe a range of ways in which this may take place using technologies and offer guidelines on good practice using various tools.

You may be a regular email user and wondering how communicating with fellow students could help your study. Perhaps you are nervous at the thought of studying off campus, effectively on your own. Chapters 6 and 7 discuss *Communicating and community*, describing the ways in which you communicate with a group, together with guidelines on communicating appropriately using a variety of tools.

You may be good at browsing the web and perhaps you are wondering what resources are appropriate for study, or whether you should be using them at all. Or maybe you are studying in English although that is not your first language and concerned about good practice in using online resources well. Chapters 8 and 9 cover the process of *Searching and researching*, by describing ways in which searching for online resources can contribute to your study. They give you some good practice guidelines for recognising useful sources and approaching the task of effective paraphrasing, summarising and referencing, while avoiding plagiarism.

You may have word-processed an important letter, or reports for work, or perhaps a column for the community newsletter, but you might wonder how relevant this experience is for writing in higher education. Chapters 10 and 11 discuss *Writing and presenting*, illustrating ways in which

various tools are used for preparing oral and written assignments and offering guidelines for good practice.

Finally we recognise that many of the specialist terms in this book may be new, particularly if you start in the middle rather at the beginning, so we have provided a glossary which explains those terms we have used. Throughout the book are a large number of examples with further resources which you may wish to explore. We have collated all the links to these resources and presented them at the end of the book, and you will also find them on our book website, where you are welcome to add to them, or perhaps update links which no longer work. The website is to be found at: <http://sites.google.com/site/learnonlinegroup/>.

FINAL COMMENTS

Whether you are already confident with a variety of online or mobile technologies or are completely confused by anything digital, this book will provide a practical introduction to the key aspects of using technology effectively for learning and help you to make the most of the opportunities which online media and mobile devices can provide. The next chapter continues the theme of who should read this book by describing stories from students who come from a wide variety of backgrounds, with a range of experiences of study using technology.