

MOBILE LEARNING IN THE THEATER ARTS CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT

Mobile learning (m-learning) challenges the traditional definition of teaching and learning. M-learning concept is gaining popularity because it enables learning across multiple contexts and disciplines by using portable mobile devices. In recent years, it has attracted increasing attention at the tertiary level as some institutions adopt Bring Your Own Devices (BYOD) in classrooms. While m-learning is becoming ubiquitous as educators often hear about it at conferences and encounter it in literature, one might assume that many educators know about and use it in teaching. It is not, especially in theater arts classrooms. In Dance and Drama education, for instance, the use of mobile teaching and learning is extremely limited both in literature and in practice. This study looks at 146 undergraduate students in three General Education (GE) classes (two Drama and one dance) over fourteen weeks at a comprehensive university in Southern China. During lectures, in class and online, smartphones were integrated in learning and they were used in a variety of class related activities including ZOOM, virtual presentations, online polls, and video making to further engage students in deep learning. This study finds that though challenges exist, the fusion of the multichannel teaching approach (m-learning, blended learning, in class/online lectures) has enhanced teaching and learning experiences among theatre arts students.

KEYWORDS

Mobile learning; In-class/online teaching; Dance and Drama; Theater arts education.

1. INTRODUCTION

Mobile learning (m-learning) is a relatively new learning model as it integrates mobile technology to enhance learning experiences (Yuen & Yuen, 2008). In recent years, m-learning has gained sufficient momentum that it is seen in research studies, publications, at conferences, and among educators, particularly those teaching at the tertiary level. M-learning encompasses three characteristics: portability; connectivity; context sensitivity (Cheon et al., 2012). The combination of these m-learning features constructs a unique learning environment (Traxler, 2007, 2008, 2010). Researchers in this study calls this learning environment a “simulated learning space.”

1.1 Disadvantages

Despite the abundance of mobile devices, the usage of new technologies in higher education is sporadic, uneven and rigid (Selwyn, 2007). The readiness to incorporate m-learning is discussed (Park, 2011; Wang et al., 2009) and mixed views are shared among educators. Some studies show that many learners are inclined to use their mobile device for music, social media/network, and games instead of for educational purposes (Park, 2011; Wang et al., 2009). WeChat, Twitter, WhatsApp, and other instant messages are exchanged among family and friends members (Pew Research Center, 2015). In education, text messaging is incorporated into classes for content learning (Cifuentes & Lents, 2010), class discussion (Hou & Wu, 2011) and team support (Timmis, 2012). On the flip side, researchers have found that m-learning including text messaging could disrupt regular in-class teaching (Corbeil & Valdes-Corbeil, 2007; Park, 2011; Wang et al., 2009). Their concern was that the focus of the class might be carried away when mobile device activities were implemented. In short, the integration and the promotion of m-learning still faces great challenges due to its unique social, cultural, organizational, socio economic, and psychological factors (Cheon et al., 2012; Corbeil & Valdes-Corbeil, 2007; Traxler, 2007, 2010).

1.2 Advantages

Gikas and Grant (2013) have found that mobile systems could facilitate learning during lectures by posing questions and activating exercises via mobile devices. This approach increases the level of the student's engagement and participation during lectures (Markett et al., 2006), and motivates them to achieve better learning outcomes (Wang et al., 2009). Research also found that instructors preferred to use mobile devices in teaching because they generated instant responses and feedback on teaching methods and gathered insights from students on certain topics or concepts (Wang et al., 2009). However, Arrigo, Kukulka-Hulme, Arnedillo-Sanchez, and Kismihok (2013) suggest that most of the studies on m-learning were centered on the distribution of content instead of on social interaction between tutors, teachers or peers using mobile devices. Educators use learning apps (e.g., Moodle and Blackboard) on mobile devices to post reading materials or assign homework. That is not an effective use of mobile devices in education as Laurillard (2010) states that the application m-learning actually supports learning through instruction, sharing, construction, discussion, and collaboration (Laurillard, 2010).

1.3 M-learning in theatre arts (Dance and Drama)

In Dance and Drama classes, the use of mobile technology in teaching is limited (Robinson, 2016). To many people, dance and drama are linked to popular culture where subjects are shared on smartphones through social media such as Facebook and WeChat. Dance and Drama teaching methods, nonetheless, are still quite traditional and conservative (Calvert et al., 2005). Research on the use of technology, especially about mobile devices in Dance and Drama teaching remain as an uncharted territory for many educators and researchers. On the other hand, technology has been successfully used in various theater performances on stage and at site-specific locations. Some scholars suggest that these embodied arts [Dance and Drama] are less likely to be associated with technology (Calvert et al., 2005). Others argued that for better teaching outcomes and learning engagement, technology integration provides a strengthened approach for teaching Dance and Drama (Doughty et al., 2008). This paper aims to fill the gap by investigating the impact of m-learning on theater arts education.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study used mixed methods, one of which was a nonrandom sampling technique (convenience sampling) to gather data (Creswell, 2012). It also utilized qualitative case studies along with survey distribution, data collection through formal and informal semi-structured interviews, class observations, open polls, social media posts, and course assignments/projects analysis.

The participants in this study were 160 undergraduate students at a large public funded comprehensive university located in Southern China. It also categorized itself as a research-intensive institution. These students were enrolled in "Introduction to Dance Studies" and "Introduction to Drama Studies" which were general education (GE) courses. In other words, they were elective courses that students could take among hundreds of other GE courses ranging from Microbiology to Japanese language. Researchers announced the study at the beginning of the semester and stressed that the participation was entirely voluntary. All students had the same instructor, course content (two Drama classes and one Dance), and teaching schedule (3-hour lecture, once a week for a total of fourteen weeks). Students signed a consent form and were informed that the study would be used for academic purposes including scholar paper publication and conference presentations. They were also told of their rights to withdraw at any time during the study. Among all participants, 146 students from two Drama (n= 105) and one Dance (n=41) successfully completed the study. The rest of the students 16, were not included due to missing responses and absences.

The 10-item survey measured participants' views on the use of mobile devices in teaching with a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from frequently to never or extremely important to not important. Other questions were seeking their perceptions on mobile learning and their familiarity with mobile apps functions. All surveys were conducted as open polls, which were anonymous. All students were given an invitation letter to participate in a semi-structured interview but only the first twenty who handed in the consent form were recruited. All interviews were conducted on the university premises according to students' and the instructor's availability. All interviews were recorded, numbered, transcribed, and color coded.

3. PARTICIPANT PROFILE AND RESULTS

Among 146 students who completed the survey, there were more female students (females n=89) than males students (males n=57) in Dance and Drama classes. Students were from different faculties and majors: 31 per cent came from the Faculty of Social Sciences, which represented the largest student body in the study. There was only one student from the Institute of Chinese Medical Sciences due to its research based nature and most of its students were graduate students. Figure 1 shows students' representation.

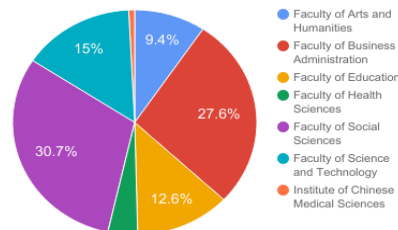


Figure 1. Student body representation.

The majority of GE courses at this university used English as the teaching language. A few GE courses used different languages due to their cultural, language acquisition nature. For instance, Portuguese and Japanese as instructional language for Culture and Language studies. Many students were fluent in three languages: English, Mandarin, and Cantonese. Local students spoke Cantonese as their mother tongue language and they represented 80 per cent of the student population. In these two courses, English was the language for instruction, assignments, and in-class/off-class communications. An online poll (diagnostic test) was conducted in the first class to find out the students' background training in Dance and Drama. The poll was made and conducted on Polleverywhere, an online survey that students could use on their mobile device. With a quick scan on Quick Response (QR) code, they were able to complete the survey in few minutes. The poll showed that a vast majority of students had little or no previous dance/drama training background. In the Dance class, 39 per cent had limited informal dance training in the past. The Poll in Drama classes indicated that 98 per cent of them had never had any theater training background. Researchers observed that every student owned at least one mobile device in these two classes. In fact, many students at this university owned multiple mobile devices and they were comfortable with mobile technology and aware of its capabilities. On average, each student owned between two and four mobile devices on campus (Tan, 2016). These findings matched previous studies (Roschelle & Pea 2002; Campbell, 2006) that young people would embrace mobile technology quickly.

3.1 Mobile learning – Student perspectives

The majority of students rated the use of a mobile device as important and effective in helping them with daily life and school work. Of all participants, close to 90 per cent rated the use of mobile devices in Drama and Dance classes important to extremely important in helping them learn the subject. This finding was in line with a previous study that the integration of technology enhances Dance and Drama teaching (Doughty et al., 2008). The percentage is almost the same when the same question was applied to students' learning in other subjects. Among Dance and Drama students, 21 per cent thought the use of mobile devices important; 42 per cent considered it very important; 33 per cent believed the use of it extremely important. This finding matched Roschelle and Pea's (2002) study, in which they predicted that young people, K-12 classrooms, would embrace portable technologies in the near future to communicate and socialize (Campbell, 2006). When asked what kind of activities students liked the most, text messaging came up to the top of the list. This finding was in line with Pew Research Center's study (2015) on instant messages' popularity. Students also indicated that simultaneous text message/feedback/comment on educational platform (Polleverywhere and Qualtrics) were effective tools to help them understand the subject (Cifuentes & Lents, 2010), stimulate in-class discussion (Hou & Wu, 2011) and promote peer collaboration (Timmis, 2012). Figure 2 and 3 show student perceptions on the effectiveness/importance of using mobile devices in learning.

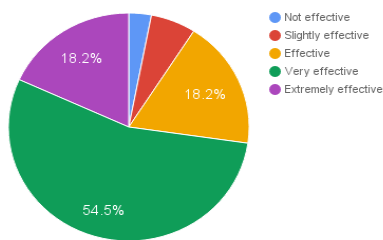


Figure 2. Attitude on the effectiveness of using mobile devices in Dance & Drama classes.

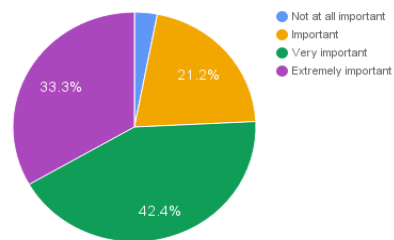


Figure 3. Important of using mobile technology in learning in general.

3.2 Mobile teaching on campus

Status of mobile teaching on campus. The entire campus including all classrooms, hallways, other learning spaces, including the dance studio and drama theater were equipped with free wifi to students and educators. Researchers observed that many students were quite accustomed with their mobile device and apps’ functions and capabilities. What made this happen? Where did student learn about it? Were other professors using mobile devices in teaching on campus? Since 146 participants came from different faculties on campus, the question on the status of mobile teaching by other educators was raised. Data showed that only 6 per cent of the teaching staff (junior lectures to full professors) used mobile devices in teaching frequently; 20 per cent used it sometimes; 20 per cent incorporated it every once in a while; the majority, 44 per cent used it rarely during lectures. The study also found that approximately 9 per cent of the educators never used any mobile device in teaching. Some professors even requested students to turn off mobile devices during classes. Interviews with students found that mobile device apps were easy to use and almost all of them did not require special training. Many students admitted that they had already obtained “mobile skills” at the high school level, which was confirmed by Campbell’s study on young people’s familiarity with mobile device applications (Campbell, 2006). Interview with the instructor revealed difficulties in applying mobile devices in teaching, especially at the beginning stage. That partially explained why so few educators on this campus used mobile devices in teaching. Figure 4 shows mobile teaching among teaching staff on campus.

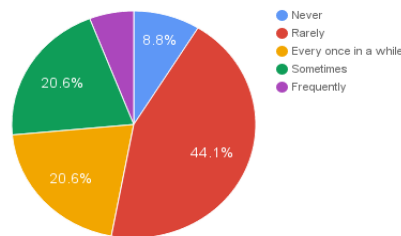


Figure 4. Mobile teaching among other Professors in the same university.

4. CONCLUSION

This study finds that all Dance and Drama students own at least one mobile device and they are familiar with mobile technology. Students can figure out certain apps to help them learn, translate, and complete assignments. On the other hand, students are easily distracted by their mobile devices’ stimulating and interactive capabilities that connect them with non-course related activities. In other words, students are easily pulled away from focusing on class content. The study also reveals that few teaching staff utilize m-learning but students view m-learning as effective and important ways in enhancing their learning experience. Students view traditional ways of lecturing, top-down style disengaging and they would like to see more professors use mobile technology in course delivery. Dance and Drama GE students consider the integration of mobile devices during lectures stimulating and beneficial. In Dance and Drama classes, mobile device become a tool by which students and educator communicate within a private educational group,

research on different topics, share resources, reflect on issues in/out of the class, and create projects effectively and efficiently. The limitation of the study on the number of students and subjects in fact points to the potential areas of research in this emerging field. While Dance and Drama classes are viewed as least likely to be associated with technology, findings from this study show promising signs that m-learning is effective. Furthermore, if m-learning benefits theater arts education, it can also enhance teaching and learning in other subject areas, locations, and students.

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