
Engaging Psychology Students at a Distance: reflections on Australian and Canadian experiences

JUDI L. MALONE

*Athabasca University, St Paul, Canada and
Charles Sturt University, Bathurst, Australia*

Engagement enhances learning, particularly for abstract and theoretical concepts. This article is an instructor reflection on student engagement with a case example of mobile learning for two differing senior undergraduate psychology courses, Theories of Counselling and Psychotherapy, and Ethics and Current Issues in Psychology. The instructor was experienced and the students were Canadian or Australian, respectively. The courses compared were delivered through an asynchronous online-enhanced distance model for a Canadian university and through a blended learning model for an Australian university. Issues with student engagement are explored through a review of informal and formal student feedback and instructor reflection. Although motivational instruction was a consistent factor in the course and instructional evaluations, this case example highlights the elusive nature of student engagement given the multiple factors involved in student expectations and needs and differing models of delivery for these undergraduate psychology courses. The author is left acknowledging only that different learning opportunities benefit the range of psychology students who may engage in them.

Innovation provides promise for enhancing student engagement. Mobile learning is a form of distance education where the instructor and student(s) may be geographically separated and where some or all of the course interaction takes place through technology or at a distance (Ally, 2008; Wali, Winters, & Oliver, 2008). The many terms for postsecondary education in this nontraditional format include e-learning, mobile learning, and distance education. I prefer the term 'mobile learning', as defined by Wali et al. (2008), which is a learning context mediated by tools, irrespective of what those may be (technology, software, concepts, etc.). Computer use has become an integral aspect of higher education and there are now countless learning environments, each with combinations of software, hardware, Internet, and instructional resources (Conole & Dyke, 2004).

This shift in education reflects institutional responses to financial and enrolment pressures and changes in student expectations and access needs, making mobile learning in psychology progressively more common (Hulbert-Williams, 2010; Miller & Hutchens, 2009; Murphy, Levant, Hall, & Glueckauf, 2007). These approaches to learning may lessen the barriers inherent in classroom-based models and provide the advantage of flexibility for students, instructors, and institutions (Price & Kirkwood, 2011), but they are not without their own challenges. Successful adoption of mobile learning is a complex - and energy-consuming - growth process for students, instructors, and institutions (Burge, Campbell Gibson, & Gibson, 2011). The integration of technology and geographical dispersion fundamentally changes Internet access requirements, interpersonal communication and contact (synchronous or asynchronous) styles, the selection of (rather than access to) learning materials, and the way we teach and assess learning (Conole & Dyke, 2004).

Different and rapidly evolving learning media allow a variety of tools for educational remediation, student cooperation, collaboration, and communication (Ally, 2008; Anderson, 2008; Burge et al., 2011; Fahy, 2008), and as distance educators we make frequent choices about our use of these technologies (Anderson, 2008). Comparing different course-delivery methods allows psychology instructors to compare the effectiveness of various tools for engaging distance students.

In this article I compare my experiences as an instructor of senior undergraduate psychology courses in Canada and in Australia using various approaches to foster student and instructor interaction at a distance. I compare two delivery models in a case-study presentation in an attempt to identify issues in student engagement and to reflect on successes, needs, and future considerations for e-learning and psychology.

Personal Placement

I am a registered psychologist (in Alberta, Canada, and Australia) and I instruct in senior undergraduate psychology courses. Over the past decade these counselling and related courses have been delivered in various formats that have ranged from traditional classroom to distance and mobile models. My personal philosophy of teaching is consistent with constructivist theories. I believe that learners interpret information subjectively and that instructors need to consider the phenomenological reality of students' personalised learning, consistent with Ally's (2008) assertion that 'learners learn best when they can contextualize what they learn for immediate application and personal meaning' (p. 19). This bias may reflect the applied nature of the courses that I instruct and also my openness to the flexibility inherent in mobile learning options. Mobile learning is, ultimately, a student-centred form of teaching and learning (Willems, 2011).

Comparing Delivery Models

In this article I reflect on my 2010 experiences with senior undergraduate psychology courses for Athabasca University (AU), Canada's Open University, and for Charles Sturt University (CSU), a national Australian university. This case study compares the different e-learning models used to instruct Theories of Counselling and Psychotherapy, and Ethics and Current Issues in Psychology, respectively, both senior-level bachelor degree psychology courses.

To facilitate this comparison, I will outline definitions of terms that are used within these two instructional models, beginning with mobile learning. Borrowing from the interpretation of Wali et al. (2008), this is 'the continuity of learning activities that take place in multiple contexts, which are embodied as the combination of the physical and social settings of the learning activities' (p. 41) – essentially, learning that takes place not in a fixed or predetermined location and that may use a variety of tools. Mobile learning was employed in different forms in these two courses, as highlighted in Table 1.

Another essential definition is that of 'educational social software' (ESS). It is well recognised that students' sense of identification with their peers is important to their success (Smailes & Gannon-Leary, 2011), and there are increased expectations that students engage socially and collaboratively through multimedia environments (Willems, 2011). ESS is developed for that purpose (Conole & Dyke, 2004).

AU's online-enhanced continuous enrolment refers to a style of course delivery where learning resources are available to students in print form and online. In this model of mobile learning students can enrol at the beginning of any given month, and so students in an instructor's group may be in various stages of course completion at any given time. Students have access to telephone or email-based tutorial support with a subject-matter expert, and to extensive library and digital resources and learner services. Content is standardised through a rigorous course design process.

The CSU blended learning format involves a multiday residential intensive seminar prior to distance delivery course completion. Students and instructors access an interactive online programme to upload and download assignments and resources. Content is instructor-managed, as the instructor monitors, constructs, and updates course resources and activities throughout the

delivery process. Students have access to extensive library and digital resources and learner services.

Table 1. Course comparison chart.

Course Name	Theories of Counselling & Psychotherapy	Ethics & Current Issues in Psychology
Institution	Athabasca University (Canada's Open University)	Charles Sturt University (an Australian national university)
Mobile learning	Online enhanced - continuous enrolment	Blended learning format
ESS (educational social software)	Optional access to a course specific ESS (instructor monitored) and to a general learning ESS (not monitored)	Required and optional ESS components, both instructor monitored
Student-to-student contact	Not a course requirement - limited to optional ESS	During the residential school and required ongoing contact for group-work
Enrolment number	80	75
Assessment activities	All individualised	Individual and group
Instructor title	Tutor	Lecturer
Instructor access to registry	Direct access	No access
Instructor management of course content and resources	Restricted. Standardised development	Entirely instructor managed. Approval rather than standardisation

The two courses reviewed in this case study have many similarities. Both involved large numbers of undergraduate students taking a senior course in applied and theoretical psychology. Both courses represented student-centred constructivist pedagogy and were designed to facilitate higher-order critical thinking, and used instructional strategies known to support the teaching of psychology through activities requiring metacognitive skills and formative and summative assessment activities to facilitate student reflection (Tao, Ramsey, & Watson, 2011; Trapp, 2007). In both models, students had the ability to have a social presence and the flexibility afforded by distance learning. Both learning models required considerable instructional and technological resources.

The differences in instructor involvement, connectivist opportunities, and individualisation of study across these mobile learning models are also noteworthy. As an instructor, I found teacher-student presence to be greater in the AU model. Here, students had enhanced levels of individualised support and opportunities for personalised direct instruction. The course design was rigorous and consistent across students enrolled in the same edition of the course. The CSU model, however, provided instructor leeway with the course design, which could be altered during the course delivery. This meant flexibility in instruction but inconsistency across cohorts.

Current pedagogical models, including connectivist theories, stress the value of collaborative learning (Anderson, 2008). Opportunities for student-student connections and student modelling were far greater in the CSU course, which employed more community-centred learning and discourse. The CSU course required a social presence and group projects that were constructed through wikis and documented as shared learning objects, which have demonstrated benefit in blended learning (Hulbert-Williams, 2010). These kinds of activities are easier within cohort-based blended learning models, but require greater technological skills for students and instructors (Tao et al., 2011). Although the AU course supplied the means for peer contact it neither required this nor did it involve cooperative learning activities. While individualised online study models enhance flexibility they also create considerable challenge for facilitating any peer collaboration between students (Anderson, 2008).

Finally, the ability to individualise the learning process differed across these models. Key to this was the difference between asynchronous and synchronous study models. AU's asynchronous model did not require students to work at the same pace, with the same deadlines, or collaboratively. CSU's synchronous model employed collaborative student projects and discussions. The dichotomy in this model is that rich forms of communication arise when student

interaction is required but that these interactions also have the pressure of immediacy and require that the all group members learn at the same pace (Chen, Liang, & Wang, 2011). This tends to restrict the independence of the learner and put pressure on interactions over personally meaningful explorations (Anderson, 2008; Chen et al., 2011). Asynchronous learning models have the potential to foster greater reflection and critique (Conole & Dyke, 2004). The AU students had more privacy and control over personal sharing but at the cost of collaborative learning benefits.

Table 2. Influences of the different mobile learning models.

Highly personalised & autonomous study model (AU) versus model with student-to-student interaction & group collaboration (CSU)	
Similarities	Large numbers of students Senior undergraduate courses Applied & theoretical course content Student-centred constructivist pedagogy Student reflexivity facilitated Social presence encouraged Mobile learning flexibility Considerable instructional & technological resource
Differences	Individualised support versus group instruction Content consistency versus instructional flexibility Self-paced learning versus community-centred learning Individualised assessment versus individual and collaborative assessment Dynamic interactions versus unrushed reflection Learner independence versus social presence and community discourse Privacy versus collaborative learning benefits

One model supported greater learner freedom and independence whereas the other provided greater social presence and interaction, a common dynamic when considering e-learning environments. Key to this article is reflecting on student engagement and attempting to unpack the influence of these different delivery models.

Student Engagement

Student engagement is known to be facilitated by active learning, collaborative learning, university support systems, and student-instructor interactions (Sheard, Carbone, & Hurst, 2010; Smailes & Gannon-Leary, 2011). This has been shown to be enhanced in mobile learning models, and in particular through the use of online resources. In university studies, however, student engagement is known to be a multidimensional and changing phenomenon. Influential factors are variable and include student, institutional, and course contextual considerations and their interactions (Sheard et al., 2010).

In an attempt to identify issues with student engagement within these case scenarios I have reviewed informal student feedback (emails and direct communications), my own reflections as an experienced instructor, and the formal course assessments completed by the two student groups. Informal student feedback was common in both courses. The AU students frequently spoke about the sense of isolation from their peers in the course. The CSU students most frequently spoke about the required group-work. Students do report benefit from collaborative work using wikis (Hulbert-Williams, 2010); however, the CSU students shared concerns and criticisms as well as positive evaluations of this group activity. A study by Walker (2007) found that students with extroverted personalities found undergraduate psychology course group-work more enjoyable than their more introverted peers. She also found that the introvert, extrovert, and control groups did not significantly differ in their assessment marks (Walker, 2007). This may explain the range of student reactions to the required group activity.

As an instructor, I found that I needed to tailor my teaching style to facilitate student engagement. In the AU individualised study format I facilitated regular personalised emails to

students. In the CSU blended learning model I focused more on engaging lectures and facilitating forum discussions. Both systems facilitated student reflection and engagement but in very different ways. One focused on personalising learning and the other on collective learning. The CSU blended learning format enabled me to update materials, be responsive to group needs, and ensure easy access for the students. I did find student readiness and needs easier to assess in this model, but also found this course more difficult to manage. This was consistent with literature findings that blended learning provides improved learning outcomes (Tao et al., 2011) but may foster difficulties in providing a cohesive and integrated course experience (Murphy et al., 2007). The CSU students, who were required to have an ongoing social and course presence, tended to remain active forum participants, socially and academically. Few AU students accessed the optional ESS despite regular instructor postings of resources and even when peers sought out peer-to-peer contact on that site. The reasons for this are unclear and consistent across the literature when examining social learning resources that are not required course components (Anderson, 2008). CSU students appeared surprised to receive prompt instructor responses, whereas AU student interactions were more likely to demonstrate unrealistic expectations (the expectation of same day responses). In both models I was able to provide the instruction anywhere, at any time, and I could have been in either country.

All students were provided with optional formal course and instructional evaluations. In the AU course, three of the evaluation questions were judged as potentially reflective of student engagement. These questions queried the course quality, the ease of understanding and integrating course material, and the utility of the assessment activities for personal reflexivity. Mean scores indicated satisfaction on these measures. The few qualitative responses provided focused positively on the organisation and structure of the course and the personal and professional benefit of the course materials and assessment activities. Comments included: 'it helped me to understand myself and how I relate to others' and 'taking this course has heightened my sense of self-awareness'. More often, positive comments were directed at the instructional support provided, specifically at the promptness of responses, clear feedback and direction, and perceived empathy, helpfulness, and instructional support.

The CSU course evaluation also had three questions potentially reflective of student engagement. These questions queried whether the course stimulated their learning, benefited other course and professional training, and provided personal and professional challenge. Mean scores indicated that students 'strongly agree' with these queries, and that they 'very strongly agree' with questions in another section devoted to instruction which queried helpfulness, whether the learning activities fostered learning relationships, and responsiveness. Qualitative responses were only sought about the instruction provided, and were positive.

Student satisfaction is, indeed, a shared responsibility (Trapp, 2007). Knowledge-centred learning can be enhanced in distance learning models, but needs to be facilitated by skilled instructors (Anderson, 2008; Fahy, 2008). Although it is difficult to accurately assess the quality of undergraduate psychology instruction (Trapp, 2007), there was consistent student feedback that focused on the quality of instructional interactions. This is consistent with the findings of Malouff, Hall, Schutte, and Rooke (2010), who found that motivational instruction strategies increased satisfaction in psychology courses. Indeed, in both models I expressed interest in facilitating student learning, demonstrated empathy, and sought to provide prompt, constructive feedback. These may have been key aspects of student engagement.

Discussion and Conclusions

This article was an instructor reflection on the use of two mobile learning models for the delivery of senior-level undergraduate psychology credits. Both models challenged institutional, instructional, and student resources and neither offered flexible learning without barriers. There were, however, successes and strong indicators of student satisfaction both in the model that allows for highly personalised and autonomous study (AU) and in the model that fostered student-to-student interaction and group collaboration (CSU). Key aspects may have been that, despite differing delivery models, both case examples incorporated instructional techniques for motivation and both sought to enhance the personal reflexivity of students in relation to the course content.

Mobile learning is increasing student access to psychology courses (Miller & Hutchens, 2009), but technological advances are not always introduced with appropriate pedagogy (Sheard et al., 2010). As instructors, we need to reflect on models of delivery, instructional styles, ways to foster connectivism, and, ultimately, student engagement considerations.

Although learning technologies provide flexibility and potential, no delivery model is the apparent best choice for students in mobile learning environments (Anderson, 2008). Students are diverse in their learning styles and expectations and may seek independence and/or collaboration to meet their learning needs in a mobile learning environment (Parker, 2008; Willems, 2011). Student-readiness considerations go beyond course content and must take into account variations in desire for autonomy, in technological skills, and in ability to interact in online environments. As instructors we need to facilitate a learning environment that supports the full range of required skills (Fahy, 2008) – and to have those skills ourselves – if we are to use innovation to enhance student engagement and success. Positive and adapted instructional interactions are indispensable for facilitating student engagement.

My challenge, in terms of the delivery of the courses reviewed in this article, was to alter my instructional style accordingly, varying the focus on course resources, interactions, and direct communications depending on the model used. This meant shifting between instructional styles, from being the formal authority or subject-matter expert, to being the demonstrator modelling the application, the facilitator of interactions, or the delegator of learning responsibilities. For me this was a perpetual learning curve, determining the students' contextual needs as they evolved.

Neither model was truly demonstrative of connectivism in education, as neither achieved a blend of the wealth of information and technology available to the students. This would have meant providing a learning context that was simultaneously learner-centred, content-centred, community-centred, and assessment-centred (Anderson, 2008). The real challenge, in my experience, was to use technology to enhance student engagement and learning.

Complex - and changing - matrices of influential factors make student engagement an elusive concept. While there is a relationship between learning activities and social context (Wali et al., 2008), the question remains how to integrate social context in a meaningful way to enhance learning and student engagements. Recent research by Smailes and Gannon-Leary (2011) has indicated varying levels of educational success with institution controlled learning environments, non-institutional social networking opportunities, and virtual worlds. Further, determining how to assess this engagement and the myriad essential factors involved may be difficult. As an example, Sheard et al. (2010) found that instructors perceived a different - and lower - level of engagement than was self-reported by university students, and they found that the former may undervalue the influence of technology for learning engagement.

My ongoing challenge will be the design of psychology courses that accommodate changing student, instructor, curricular, and institutional needs. I agree with Chen et al. (2011), who conclude that genuine learning communities will emerge out of collaborations between learners and educators that redefine teaching and learning. I want to play an informed part in shaping the future of the instruction of psychology in ways that consider the student, the technology, the web of interactions that take place, and the potential for student engagement in the entire process. Our collective challenge is to understand the needs and skills required to redefine the teaching and learning of psychology. Beyond reflexivity, this requires research and evaluation of our practices, sharing our experiences, and truly understanding why the change is needed (Burge et al., 2011; Trapp, 2007).

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JUDI MALONE is a registered psychologist (in Alberta, Canada, and Australia) and instructs in undergraduate psychology for Athabasca University, Canada's Open University, and Charles Sturt University, an Australian national university. Her research interests include professional ethics and rural practice, and her instructional interests include counselling and psychotherapy-related topics. Correspondence: judim@athabascau.ca, jmalone@csu.edu.au