

THE SOMOLEARN INITIATIVE: EMPOWERING TEACHERS TO RECRUIT MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES AND SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN ALLY

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Abstract

We are all familiar with the image of the student obsessively using her mobile to check her facebook, update her twitter, and share images on instagram. Such practices are typically seen as disruptive to learning, and thus these media – or even the mobile devices themselves – are often banned from educational spaces.

Yet at a closer look, these are perhaps disruptive learning practices – not disruption to learning. Students are using social and mobile media to share their experiences, reflect on their own and their peers' experiences, and together construct meanings from them. Some of these activities are supportive of the students' formal and informal education, such as facebook groups created for particular courses. Others may be less aligned, or even in conflict, with the values, competencies, and knowledge that we, as educators, wish to promote.

Academic research and commercial providers have been singing the virtues of mobile learning for quite some time. Yet, as Niall Winters eloquently argued recently – these benefits are not manifesting themselves in educational systems, mainly because most attempts to promote them are bypassing the primary agents of change in any educational system: teachers.

The purpose of the SoMoLearn initiative is to empower teachers to recruit mobile technologies and social media as an ally in their work with students. Our main mode of operation is through professional development workshops. These workshops are based on a Learning Design Studio model, which ensures that participants go home with concrete practical outcomes: resources and activity plans they can use in their work.

The Learning Design Studio is an inquiry-based framework for professional development of educational practitioners.

Teachers, education leaders, policy makers and developers often find it hard to apply the outputs of

research and innovation in education and technology to their practice. The theoretical structures feel abstract and remote, thus resisting application in real life settings. Many examples seem rooted in a specific and unique context, making them hard to transfer to novel situations.

The Learning Design Studio confronts this challenge by engaging practitioners in a process of Design Inquiry of Learning. This process combines the iterative structure of educational design research with the principles of inquiry learning . Educational practitioners follow a cycle of:

- Defining their project
- Investigating the context in which it is situated and identifying appropriate techno-pedagogical theories
- Reviewing relevant cases and theories
- Conceptualizing a solution
- Implementing a prototype of that solution,
- Evaluating it
- Reflecting on the process.

Although this cycle is presented as a neat linear progression, in reality project work is messy and iterative. Practitioners revisit various points as their understanding evolves.

A review by the EPPI-Centre at the Institute of Education, University of London, found that and collaborative professional development was linked with a positive impact upon teachers' repertoire of teaching and learning strategies, their ability to match these to their students' needs, their self-esteem and confidence, and their commitment to continuing learning and development. They also found evidence that such professional development was linked with a positive impact upon student learning processes, motivation and outcomes.

The Learning Design Studio is structured as a collaborative, project-based, blended learning experience, based on the metaphor of studio instruction in design disciplines. Participants work in teams of 4-6 members on a learning design project of their definition. The workshop facilitators offer guidance, feedback and advice. At every stage, the teams share their work, provide feedback to their peers, and discuss the similarities and differences between their projects.

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