Exploring the effects of portable visual learning technology on the experience of learning in the Graduate School

What was the learning and teaching issue that this initiative sought to address?

The aim of this initiative was to give immediate access to mobile visual technologies for regionally-based part-time doctoral students in the School of Nursing, and at the same time explore the presumed benefits of mobile visual learning for these and other postgraduate groups. We used HTC TyTN PDA Pocket PC Mobile Phones, chargers and SIM cards.

What did the students do?

In the initial face-to-face introduction to the device, it was modelled as giving students mobile access to the Internet, PDF files, video streams to support their learning about research methodology, as well as their substantive fields. It was further suggested to users that the equipment could be used to gather visual (and audio) data and as a tool for reflection in research. Blogging and journal streams with visual prompts (recorded by staff using the TyTN) were created for this purpose in WebCT. There was a range of overlapping expectations about how the device would be used, which included: distance work;

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research; mobile working; mobile storage; PC programmes; keeping notes about research; accessing and responding to emails.

The students were asked to reflect on an aspect of their research and use the device to share that with the others. One student did a reflection on the ethics of her research. She put together a combination of face-to-face material and PowerPoint slides. She had never done it before, so it was new learning for her. For at least half of them, the sense of using a tool in this way was new. The acid test was whether

any of the students would actually have one! For one lecturer, part of the reason she had become involved, was that in her University, lecturers were going to be given one. She felt scared and unprepared so this was a chance to get to grips with it. She felt her level of confidence improved to the extent that she was even able to help colleagues in her institution in their first forays into using the device as a research and work tool.

What were the learning and teaching outcomes?

In Nursing, everyday ward practice increasingly involves extensive use of technology, yet the change of context with this project left some of the students feeling deskilled. They all reached a point in the process where they actively reminded themselves that they have these skills, and had the confidence to be able to deploy technologies in new contexts. Most of the participant-learning was around the incorporation of technology into current behaviours: handling new technology with greater confidence; being exposed to new ways of incorporating visual technologies into work lives and actively engaging in this. The combination of the device with the support of WebCT (WebCT discussion forum posts were higher than expected), offers powerful possibilities for developing group learning. The initiative is seen by the Graduate School as effectively laying the foundations for the success of future work using complex interactive technologies to enhance the postgraduate student learning experience in Nottingham, Malaysia and China.