

ShoutBox

A mobile/web tool to support and showcase informal (out-of-school) learning



September 2008

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1. BACKGROUND

In January 2008, Futurelab put out a national call for ideas around '**supporting and showcasing informal learning**'. Over 110 entries were received, with ShoutBox being one of only three to be short-listed for further exploration. Over a three-month period, desk research, expert interviews and a small study were conducted, resulting in findings and recommendations for the use of such tools to support and showcase young people's informal learning.

2. THE ISSUE

Defining informal learning

"Informal learning should no longer be regarded as an inferior form of learning whose main purpose is to act as the precursor of formal learning; it needs to be seen as fundamental, necessary and valuable in its own right, at times directly relevant to employment and at other times not relevant at all." (Coffield 2000)

To gain consensus on what is meant by the phrase 'informal learning', a useful starting point is to make a distinction between the terms 'formal' and 'informal'. Formal learning tends to have a curriculum attached to it that has been prescribed by someone other than the learner, with some recognition at the end. Informal learning is never-ending, it is happening all the time, at the request or desire of the learner who completely owns the activity.

Informal learning is considered to be characterised by the following features:

- It is not an activity planned for the sole purpose of learning but rather it is often unconscious and incidental.
- It does not take place in a specific educational institution removed from everyday life or professional practice.
- It has no curriculum and is not an organised event but rather it tends to be accidental, sporadic and associated with other events.
- It is driven by the participant who determines what activities to partake in, where, when and with whom.

The role of social capital

How our social networks help to create and exchange skills, knowledge and attitudes that in turn allow people to tap in to other benefits is imperative to any discussion on how informal learning occurs. Social networks and learning are both desirable resources. They both help us to enjoy other benefits, including the pleasure of learning something new or extending our friendships.

The benefits of learning outside the classroom

"These, often the most memorable learning experiences, help us to make sense of the world around us by making links between feelings and learning. They stay with us into adulthood and affect our behaviour, lifestyle and work. They influence our values and decisions we make." (DfES 2006)

There are still significant numbers of young people who are being failed by formal education – leaving school with few, if any, qualifications. Young people spend a disproportionate amount of time in informal learning settings compared with more formal school settings (14% spent in

formal). Therefore, there appears to be a need to develop practices and resources to acknowledge knowledge, skills and competencies displayed by young people within these informal settings.

Recent research¹ has indicated that educational relationships outside school enable young people to gain a variety of skills and understandings. In particular, it has been suggested that young people who participate in such activities are able to gain a more sophisticated knowledge of themselves as learners through understanding:

- that learning is active
- the importance of rules and roles in learning
- that skills and knowledge can be transferred across different contexts of learning
- the benefits of greater self-control and confidence.

The changing face of informal learning

“The kinds of knowledge and the modes of learning exemplified in out-of-school informal learning is very relevant to learning how to become a modern kind of worker and that the formal education system needs to find ways to intersect with this kind of learning as a valid curriculum aim.” (Sefton-Green 2004)

Recent statistics² provide further evidence for the pervasive nature of technology in the lives of most young people in the UK. Key technology, including television, games consoles and the internet, are seemingly well established by the age of 5. As young people get older their use of technology increases, largely driven by increases in mobile phone and internet use. Reports indicate that 95% of 15 year-olds regularly use mobile phones, and within the same age group, 84% of girls and 75% of boys use the internet weekly for instant messaging, with 79% and 64% respectively using the internet weekly for social networking. Although social networking sites are mainly used as a communications tool to manage existing relationships, a significant minority are using them to communicate with people they do not know (11%).

With the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies there appears to have been an apparent growth in informal learning activity. The rationale provided for this apparent increase appears to stem from the very nature of Web 2.0 technologies to act as social participatory tools.

Predictably, the key determinant influencing ownership of technologies is social class – with more affluent families having significantly greater ownership. It is important to emphasise that being able to access technology does not necessarily determine how that technology will be used. In fact, one of the defining features of research over the last few years has been to emphasise that technology ‘itself’ does not determine how it will be used, but rather, that ways of using the technology emerge through a complex interplay between young people’s expectations, family cultures and features of the technology.

A significant conclusion from studies of young people’s digital cultures - computer games play, web use and especially use of mobile phone technologies³ - is the commitment demonstrated by the users to these activities. All these studies underline how this learning is predicated on a high degree of motivation with a particular focus on the emotional kind of involvement in the

¹ Wikeley, F et al (2007). *Educational Relationships Outside School: Why access is important*: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

² Ofcom (2008). Media Literacy Report. UK: Ofcom.

³ Harkin, J (2003). Mobilisation: *The Growing Public Interest in Mobile Technologies*. London: Demos.

use of technologies. This has been described by researchers⁴ as young people using technology-based activities as part of the construction of their own personal identity. From the existing research to date, the practices involved in young people's technology-mediated cultures seem to suggest that:

- Many young people are working within communities of learning, in which they take on the roles of teacher and learner and induct other individuals into their group activities.
- Some young people are comfortable operating as equals within adult domains.
- Some young people are actively teaching themselves a range of skills and competencies either as part of their peer group cultures, or as mediated by technologies.

3. RATIONALE BEHIND SHOUTBOX

- To raise the profile and value of out-of-school learning.
- To enable young people to better understand the benefits from their out-of-school experiences.
- To support young people in their out-of-school experiences.
- To inform teachers and/or 'others' of the activities young people choose to partake in outside school and how this may benefit their relationships and learning in school.

4. DESCRIPTION OF SHOUTBOX

- A cross-platform tool which allows young people to recognise and showcase learning outside the classroom.
- Uses technology already familiar with young people, such as mobile phones and social networking sites.
- Uses mobile technology that allows young people to capture their digital stories whenever and wherever they happen – leading to a more authentic learning experience.
- Young people capture their out-of-school experiences on video, photo or audio applications.
- Young people tag their captured experiences in themes and categories, such as sport and leadership.
- Young people showcase their out-of-school learning through a ShoutBox website or dedicated space on a popular social networking site, eg Bebo or Facebook.
- Young people, experts and interested parties provide young people with feedback on their out-of-school experiences that they have chosen to share through their ShoutBox.

ShoutBox allows young people to individually generate and collate different forms of content using their mobile phone and then share this with peers online. The tools can be used to highlight learning in different categories such as sports, work, art, music, care etc.

Within a mobile phone application the user will be guided by a friendly character that presents different themes such as leadership, teamwork etc, and encourages them to generate content which mirrors the theme in their own activities outside school. The user can then show off their content in social networking sites (such as Facebook) to be displayed on their profile. The content will be laid out inside a fun scene relating to the learning category and allow peer review and commenting.

There are two clear aspects to the tool. The first is about provoking thought and reflection on informal learning, the second is a showcase for those thoughts and ideas.

⁴ Facer, K et al (2003). *Screenplay*. London: Routledge Falmer.

User experience

The start point for the user is to visit a website which introduces the project. The first step for them is choosing a learning category relevant to their own outside learning, so if they have a paper round they may wish to choose work, or if they take part in a Judo class they can choose sport.

After this, on their downloaded mobile application, a new project can be started whenever the user wishes. The character will then present a theme (eg teamwork) to the user, perhaps via a small story or example, and ask if they have experienced anything similar, and if they could record it. Then it is up to the user to generate content from their outside learning by taking photos, writing comments, capturing audio and video using their phone. The types and amount of content will be loosely specified but there should be scope for users to make some decisions. There is no time limit for this and the user can invoke the application many times; the content is uploaded to a server as it is created.

Within the social networking application all the content from the project will be visible on their profile page in a fun and imaginative setting. It is then up for comment and review by friends.

5. FINDINGS FROM A SMALL STUDY

Using a mock-up of ShoutBox, a group of six young people were asked to capture their out-of-school experiences, edit and tag their 'stories' and showcase them on the Shineweek website (www.shineweek.org.uk). The participants were all part of an opportunity sample which comprised of three boys and three girls from two learning institutions in Bristol.

Two workshops were facilitated by the researcher in order to discuss with young people their thoughts and experiences of out-of-school learning and to gather feedback from the young people on their experience of using ShoutBox. Two teachers that worked with the young people in their respective schools observed the two workshops. Both teachers and the six young people were interviewed at the end of the study to capture their thoughts on their experience of ShoutBox.

Emerging themes from study

i) Young people viewed their out-of-school learning opportunities differently to those gained in school.

"Learning outside the classroom you don't have many rules really, you can decide when, what, how and where you do your activity, which is good because it just gives you that much more freedom than inside school and obviously in-school learning doesn't suit everyone." Male 1

The notion of learning without rules was popular amongst the six young people when asked to compare their experiences of learning outside the classroom compared with inside. Having no rules allowed the young people to have control over their out-of-school learning experiences which at times meant they were able to do very different activities compared with those that were chosen for them in the school setting.

"In school you've got loads of rules that you have to follow, outside the classroom you're more in control, you set your own standards. In school, you know when you're doing it and who you're doing it with." Female 1

ii) Young people did not recognise the benefits gained from out-of-school experiences without prompts and time to reflect.

"I never thought about what I did outside school, I just did it because I enjoyed it. I didn't think of the benefits I would get from it." Female 2

Discussions about what activities the young people chose to engage in outside school clearly showed that this was a subject they had not talked or thought about much in the past. In particular, when asked to describe what they gained from these experiences they struggled to respond, other than to say how much they enjoyed these events.

iii) With prompts and reflection time, young people were able to describe the benefits they gained from out-of-school experiences.

"Playing the guitar and solving Rubik's cube. I've done these because, well obviously I like doing these kinds of things, and I just wanted to show what I could do outside of school, which I have learnt not in the classroom." Male 2

Prompts used by the researcher included 'how does this activity make you feel?' and 'why do you keep doing this activity?'

"By attending drama classes I've gained more confidence... even if I don't get chosen for a major part in a play we are doing I still like going and taking part with my friends, it's just fun." Male 3

"I'm rubbish at golf but I still go every weekend to our local course... I think it's the challenge that keeps me going back and trying." Male 2

The social element of out-of-school activities appeared to be a common rationale given by the young people for why they not only chose to participate in these activities but also kept returning to the same events even if they deemed themselves not very good at them.

iv) Young people 'enjoyed' the experience of capturing their out-of-school experiences.

"I just think it's really clever and fun, it's a brilliant idea." Female, 3

Using the mock-up of ShoutBox the young people expressed how much fun they had when capturing what they chose to do outside school. There may be a novelty factor here but the responses from the young people suggest that at least initially the activity of recording what they do outside school is enjoyable.

"I took it with me everywhere, it was such a laugh." Female 1

v) Young people were able to tag their captured experiences within themes and categories but they found the task difficult.

"I had to think about it but I did cut up my film by putting it into sections." Male 1

The mock-up of ShoutBox did not support the young people to categorise their experiences and they did find this task difficult, although all of the young people did make an attempt to do so.

"It would be useful to have some examples of categories to put what I'd filmed into... it's quite hard to think what you get from doing something because most of the time you just do it without thinking why you do it." Female 2

vi) Young people saw the benefit of showcasing their experiences to friends, family, teachers and other interested parties, but in a safe, constructive online space.

"I'd like to show it to other people with the same kind of interests that I have. I would also like to see how other people are doing to kind of compare themselves. Obviously I'd do that with other people, and it would be quite good to show it to people who could help you improve on what you were doing because then it would make the experience much better really, because you get something back out of it." Male 3

Some of the young people suggested that when showcasing what they did outside school they would welcome comments from others, as long as they were helpful ones.

"You can get constructive criticism from it, if you voice it to people who are in the same situation as you it would be able to help." Female 3

It appeared important to some young people to demonstrate what they do outside school since this showed people a different side to them.

"And showing what people do outside school compared to in school is completely different, you do completely different things, so it would show this is what someone is like during school and this is what someone is like outside of school." Female 2

vii) Teachers were surprised by how differently young people viewed their out-of-school experiences.

"What was interesting is that they didn't value it [out-of-school learning] as education." Teacher 1

The two teachers were genuinely taken aback by how their students did not feel that what they did outside school was of the same value as what they did within. The young people quoted the lack of acknowledgement for partaking in these out-of-school events as the reason behind this view. They simply thought that no-one was interested.

"Why would they be interested? What we do in school is completely different, they [teachers] aren't interested." Male 1

Teachers wished to bridge the gap between the two experiences – taking what young people showcased to inform their personal curricula.

"I'm really enthused by it. I think I may now try to introduce and adapt some of the practices I have for homework, or independent learning, into the classroom from what I've seen." Teacher 2

The teachers were insistent that they would make more opportunities available to allow young people to share their out-of-school experiences.

6. SUMMARY

- The idea of ShoutBox was popular amongst both young people and teachers who took part in the study.
- All participants in the study saw the benefits of using ShoutBox to support and showcase their out-of-school learning.
- The final ShoutBox would benefit from having categories and themes to support the young people in identifying the benefits they gained from their out-of-school activities.
- Websites that filtered negative comments would be welcome by young people wishing to showcase their out-of-school experiences.
- Teachers must consider how they may inform their lesson planning through an understanding of what young people choose to share with them about their out-of-school experiences.

7. REFERENCES

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APPENDIX 1: REVIEW OF CURRENT DIGITAL TOOLS WITH SIMILARITIES TO SHOUTBOX

Tool	Cost	Description	Good for	Not so good for	Desirability
Beanbag www.beanbaglearning.com	Free (pricing structure to come)	A social networking site for connecting with tutors and sharing learning resources. Mixture of resources varying from videos to links	Connecting with tutors	Encouraging informal learning	Does not help to recognise informal learning - might be useful to integrate with as a next step after informal learning has been recognised (ie to take it further, find a tutor in your area)
Yeardot www.yeardot.co.uk	Free (adverts?)	A companion site to Channel 4 programme, follows 15 young people over one year. Allows other young people to comment on their achievements on a MySpace page	Video content. Using social networks	Open access - only really follows the 15 young people	Good to see how the peer comments are showcased, likewise the use of video content and the integration with a social network. Lacks a structure to encourage the realisation that learning is taking place
43 Things www.43things.com	Free	A Web 2.0 site that encourages visitors to list their goals in life and connects them to others who share those goals	Connecting people who are doing similar things. Encouraging people	Finding the learning in what they are achieving. Presenting evidence	The 'cheer' system is a good example of encouraging people to learn new skills/try new activities
Care2 www.care2.com	Donation	An ethical website where members can share and comment on resources	Sharing resources	Personalised learning	Feedback on stories descends into rants/personal attacks - important to avoid this, may need to limit free text entries or have moderation
LinkedIn www.linkedin.com	Free/\$200 a year/ \$500 a year	Business-centric social network site. Emphasis on reputation	Networks of contacts. Recommendations	Appealing to young people. Learning	Powerful recommendations feature. Also allows visitors to ask questions and you can post responses. Both of these are worth considering for getting feedback on informal learning

Yahoo! 360 360.yahoo.com	Free	Space to share with friends and family. Share interests with others	Sharing interests	Learning	Unfocused and unreadable - worth remembering that the ability to customise everything isn't always good
School Councils www.schoolcouncils.org	Free/up to £550 a year	Support site for running a school council. Contains resources and the ability to share advice with other councils around the country	Sharing advice	Personalised learning	Focused on formal learning with lots of best practices
Student Network Sussex www.studentnetworksussex.org.uk	Free	Site aimed at vocational students in Sussex. Provides information and views from students	Encouraging formal learning courses	Informal learning	Good summary of student achievements
BBC Blast – Film www.bbc.co.uk/blast/film	Free	Young people's showcase for their own videos. Includes mobile created submissions. Also tips and resources for getting into the film industry	Video content. Rating user content positively	Structuring informal learning	The rating system for films is split into sub-categories in addition to free text comments - worth considering as a way of providing focused feedback
Neopets www.neopets.com	Free (some premium content)	Very popular children's portal. Contains games, competitions and community features	Informal learning. Reflecting on achievements	Getting feedback on real life achievements	
Club Penguin www.clubpenguin.com	Free/£38 a year	Disney-owned children's community site. Contains games and activities which are played for digital coins	Moderating content to keep it safe. Chat	Education	Very polished, but little that promotes informal learning
PLEX (Personal Learning Environment) www.reload.ac.uk/plex	Free	Management software to organise personal learning	Personalised learning	Motivation	Very structured approach to informal learning, pulls in data from other sources. Aimed at an older audience

Bebo – BeInspired www.bebo.com/Profile.jsp?MemberId=3963484504	Free	Bebo mini-site where people can showcase their talents and share their inspirations	Encouraging informal learning	Providing a structure for feedback and reflection	Good integration with the social networking site, but there doesn't seem to be much in the way of user-generated content showcased. All of the showcased work is contained within one comments thread, making directed feedback impossible
Activmob www.activmob.com	Free	Community site to connect people so that they can organise grassroots clubs and activities	Organising real-life informal learning events	Reflecting on what has been learned	Good at connecting people with similar interests for real world events, but no features to allow reflection and discussion regarding the skills used in the events
Global Gang www.globalgang.org.uk	Free	Christian Aid children's community site	Appealing to young children	Education	User content is created in a formal environment (schools) and then submitted - little evidence of individually motivated contributions
We Are What We Do www.wearewhatwedo.org	Free	Community site aimed at helping people to make small changes in their lives in an effort to produce bigger change in society	Tracking actions, league tables	Aiding reflection on achievements	The competitive elements of the site, league tables and 'dare a friend', are useful mechanics for encouraging repeat use of the tools
Webbliworld www.webbliworld.com	Free	Children's community hub - showcases games and news	Providing safe material that is appealing to children	Learning (no formal learning, little informal)	The style is very accessible and there is an interesting commenting system for user's profiles
Pressureworks www.pressureworks.org	Free	Christian Aid campaigning site for young people. Mixture of resources, games and calls to action	Motivating	Peer comments on achievements	Clear and concise resources get the information across effectively. Reflection information structured in a similar way would be useful to motivate users to take it to the next stage