



100 days with an iPad: Lessons learnt and apps acquired

Jacqui Kelly & Judy Schrape
Centre for eLearning
Curtin University

Six staff from in the Centre for eLearning at Curtin University were supplied with an iPad each and encouraged to explore their use in a range of contexts every day for 100 days. This project aims to investigate how quickly these new devices can be integrated into daily life and what, if any, implications this new tablet would have for staff and students using them in Higher Education.

Keywords: iPad, mobile devices, mobile learning, mlearning, professions, new technologies

Introduction

When Apple released the iPad in Australia in late May 2010, there was much speculation (amid growing geek excitement) about the impact that the device would have on Higher Education. Given the increased uptake—and typically lower price range—of netbooks over the past 5 years, many wondered if the iPad's ease of use, portability and claim of a 10hr+ battery life would provide a new rival to the popular netbook (Edwards, 2010). Does the iPad have the potential to replace a netbook or laptop? Or does it serve an entirely different purpose?

Six staff members in Curtin's Centre for eLearning (<http://cel.curtin.edu.au>) were issued with iPads and asked to explore and evaluate their usefulness in different contexts every day for 100 days. The project started in June and is due to finish in September. Staff involved in the project included a Learning Management System (LMS) Manager, a Lecturer (Drama Education), two Graphic Designers and two Instructional Designers. All staff were experienced computer users, however, some staff had never used an iPod, iPhone or iPod Touch (and iTunes).

Research questions

Staff were encouraged to use the devices both in and out of working hours to determine:

- the ease of use (usability) of the iPad
- the frequency of use, and opportunities and affordances for use at meetings, whilst travelling, during conferences, and while teaching
- which applications (apps) were most useful for creating resources, interacting with resources, communicating and collaborating; and
- how they envisage that students are likely to use the devices in their studies.

Staff were asked to reflect and write about their first impressions, problems encountered, apps that they enjoyed using, and a shared blog was used to collate all observations and app reviews.

The 100 days

Month 1: Familiarisation with the device

During June the first of the iPads arrived and staff were excited to get their hands on the slick new devices. A number of iPad accessories were also purchased and trialled. These included protective cases, dock connector to VGA adapter cables, and camera kit connectors. Some staff were interested in using the iPads to take notes by hand rather than typing notes, so five different types of stylus were also tested. In the first couple of weeks staff essentially played with the iPads to familiarise themselves with the capabilities of the device. This involved:

- investigating functionality and learning how to navigate through the iPad using the touch screen
- setting up the iPad – configuring email and calendar appointments, establishing wifi and Bluetooth connections
- downloading and installing a range of apps to support creation, interaction and sharing of learning materials such as documents, e-books and multimedia; and
- accessing and testing a number of university systems including the Curtin website and LMS (Blackboard).

Month 2: Integration of the device

During the second month, a fortnightly iPad user group was established where iPad tips, tricks and apps were discussed and shared within the team. Functionality of the iPads was discussed in relation to document sharing, e-book readers which facilitated annotation and bookmarking, presentation capabilities and synchronisation with computers, laptops and mobile technologies. A group blog (<http://weeklyipad.wordpress.com/>) was set up to record all iPad apps being discussed. Staff were encouraged to start blogging about their experiences and their app preferences in order to generate a 'best of the best' list of killer apps.

Month 3: What have we (really) learnt so far?

Investigation into the use of the iPads is ongoing. During the final month each staff member will be interviewed to determine how they have used and assessed the iPad, heading towards Day 100. The interview focus will be the issues of usability, frequency of use, potential for innovative interaction with information, and effective usage by students and staff.

Results and discussion

Even staff who had no previous experience using an iPod, iPod touch or iPhone had no problems using the iPad straight out of the box without any instruction. The speed with which the iPad boots up ('instant on'), and the speed apps can be launched and switched between, is much faster than a comparable application on a laptop. Although the iPad can be successfully used propped up on your lap, or lying flat on a table top, it was considered vital to invest in iPad covers. This not only provided some basic protection for the screen, but also allowed for easier (and faster) typing when using the inbuilt landscape keyboard.

One problem observed by the team, and also noted in early research findings by the Nielsen Norman Group (2010) was the inconsistency of screen design and gestures used to operate different apps. Although some gestures such as swiping left and right were common to most apps, other gestures, such as zooming in/out or double tapping or selecting a button on screen would result in different actions. As Nielsen states "...once they figure out how something works, users can't transfer their skills from one app to the next. Each application has a completely different UI [user interface] for similar features."

Staff have identified the most common functionalities of the iPad: reading and responding to emails, browsing the internet, taking notes, consuming media and file storage. Drawing from the group blog and fortnightly user group, the project will finalise the 'best of the best' list of educational and productivity apps, which will be categorised according to their functionality. It is probable that each

profession may have its own preferred set of apps but there will be a number of apps that are common to all users. So far the following apps are strong contenders for the Top 10: Dropbox, AirVideo, Documents to Go, GoodReader and Atomic Web. As more apps are developed and released for the iPad, this list will evolve.

Future research: where to from here?

In 2011, the Centre for eLearning plans to investigate the [Blackboard Mobile Learn for the iPad](#) application and compare it with accessing the Blackboard LMS via Safari (the default web browser that comes pre-installed on the iPad). Currently, although many editing functions of the LMS do work with Safari, there are still certain elements which do not work successfully with a touch screen interface, the principal one being accessing and editing the Grade Center. The Blackboard Mobile Learn app may address some of these failings, but full user testing will need to be conducted when the app becomes available in Australia. If students are now choosing to invest in an iPad, rather than a laptop or netbook, how will this impact on the way in which they use the device and how will this in turn affect the way in which they interact with learning resources? Will existing learning materials that are currently accessed online or via an LMS be more effectively or conveniently accessed using this new medium? Further research should help to answer these key questions.

References

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Author contact details:

Jacqui Kelly Jacqui.Kelly@curtin.edu.au

Judy Schrape J.Schrape@curtin.edu.au

Centre for eLearning
Curtin University

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<http://ascilite.org.au/conferences/sydney10/procs/Kelly-poster.pdf>

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