Summary

Trinder K, Guiller J, Margaryan A, Littlejohn A and Nicol D
‘Learning from digital natives: bridging formal and informal learning’ (May 2008)

Summary by: CHERI (June 2009)

Overview
This report suggests that students are increasingly making use of a variety of e-tools (such as mobile phones, email, MSN, digital cameras, games consoles and social networking sites) to support their informal learning within formalised educational settings, and that they use the tools that they have available if none are provided for them. Therefore, higher education institutions should encourage the use of these tools.

Aims and background
This study aimed to explore how e-tools (such as mobile phones, email, MSN, digital cameras, games consoles and social networking sites) and the processes that underpin their use can support learning within educational institutions and help improve the quality of students’ experiences of learning in higher education (pgs 9-11).

Methodology
The study entailed: (i) desk research to identify related international research and practice and examples of integration of e-tools and learning processes in formal educational settings; (ii) a survey of 160 engineering and social work students across two contrasting Scottish universities (pre- and post-1992) – the University of Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian University – and follow-up interviews with eight students across the two subject areas to explore which technologies students were using for both learning and leisure activities within and outside the formal educational settings and how they would like to use such technologies to support their learning in both formal and informal settings; and (iii) interviews with eight members of staff from across the institutions and two subject areas to identify their perceptions of the educational value of the e-tools. (pgs 24-27).

Key points
- Students reported making extensive use of a variety of both e-tools (such as mobile phones, email, MSN, digital cameras) and social networking tools (such as Bebo, MySpace, Wikipedia and YouTube) for informal socialisation, communication, information gathering, content creation and sharing, alongside using the institutionally provided technologies and learning environments.
- Most of the students owned their own computer or had access to a sibling or parent’s computer. Many students owned a laptop but preferred not to bring it onto campus due to security concerns and because they found it too heavy to carry about.
- Ownership of mobile phones was ubiquitous.
- Whilst the students’ information searching literacy seemed adequate, the ability of these students to harness the power of social networking tools and informal processes for their learning was low.

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Staff reported using a few Web 2.0 and social software tools but they were generally less familiar with how these could be used to support learning and teaching. There were misconceptions surrounding the affordances of the tools and fears expressed about security and invasion of personal space. Considerations of the costs and the time it would take staff to develop their skills meant that there was a reluctance to take up new technologies at an institutional level.

Subject differences emerged in both staff and student perceptions as to which type of tools they would find most useful. Attitudes to Web 2.0 tools were different. Engineers were concerned with reliability, using institutional systems and inter-operability. Social workers were more flexible because they were focused on communication and professional needs.

The study concluded that digital tools, personal devices, social networking software and many of the other tools explored all have a large educational potential to support learning processing and teaching practices. Therefore, use of these tools and processes within institutions, amongst staff and students should be encouraged.

The report goes on to suggest ways in which the use of such technologies can help strengthen the links between informal and formal learning in higher education. The recommendations are grouped under four areas – pedagogical, socio-cultural, organisational and technological.

**Link to full report**