SUCCESS ON THE GO

Over 5.3 billion people have mobile phones. Every day that number multiplies with incredible speed. Institutions all over the globe are keeping a close eye on those statistics. Surveys and studies are conducted. Papers are written. Everyone from administration to the IT department is seriously considering the impact mobile learning can have on outcomes. One thing leading Australian institutions such as Bond University and James Cook University have discovered for sure is that mobile can offer a better experience for students while also strengthening the pedagogical process.

Bond University is one of Australia’s leading institutions. Students all over the world are drawn to its award winning education programs (Five-Star Graduate Outcomes for five years running), exceptional staff to student ratio (1:11) and beautiful campus.

Now they have another lure. They were the first Australian University to go live with the Blackboard Mobile Learn app.

“We saw the quick rise in mobile devices. Management at the highest level of our university was aware of the Horizon Report. We knew we had to cater to the growing mobile demand—even though we are a face-to-face learning environment,” says Jeff Brand, Lecturer and Chair of M-Learning Committee for Bond University.

“The Vice Chancellor asked me to chair a committee and do a white paper. We were very interested in the Blackboard Mobile Learn product, especially when we saw what it could do on the iPad. So we gave students iPads loaded with an eBook and Blackboard Mobile Learn. We evaluated their attitude towards technology in the classroom, tablets, Blackboard Mobile Learn itself, and tracked the impact on assignments, test scores and overall grades. It was an attitudinal, behavioral and quantitative study. We turned the tutorials into focus groups and allowed them to give free form answers,” says Jeff.

What they discovered was interesting. Students were very receptive, yet evaluators couldn’t determine actual impact on outcomes. They concluded that you don’t just go mobile and continue on with everything else the way you’ve always done. For mobile learning to truly affect outcomes, pedagogy needs to change. Educators need to shift the way they look at what they’re capable of doing now with this new technology.

Lauren Hives, the Multimedia Designer responsible for the marketing, promotion and technological side of the implementation at Bond University says, “I had a number of discussions with academics around campus. The lecturers are all very excited about the ability to post to wikis and blogs directly from the app and be able to take a photo or video and post it into the course. They are also excited about posting announcements from their mobile
device,” continues Lauren. “Blackboard has been great. We’ve loved the support and feedback we have received. It was very easy to access the app, download it, install it and log in.”

“When we introduced Blackboard Mobile Learn as a soft launch, students were extremely positive. They liked being able to access their classes anytime, anywhere,” says Jeff. “I think this will change the education experience. First, we need to change the attitudes of the academic community to accept there are a number of ways to achieve face-to-face without it being in person.”

Shelley Kinash, Director of Quality, Teaching and Learning for Bond University says, “We are redefining the learning process. Mobile learning is not a replacement to face-to-face teaching. It’s an enhancement. Take for example, the enhanced e-text. In class you have the textbook right there on your mobile device. It’s not a static linear text, so if someone has a question or wants an example you can find it right on the device. This can strengthen our pedagogical process.”

One of the things that students at Bond University liked most about Blackboard Mobile Learn on the iPad is being able to open multiple windows at once without having to hit the back button all the time.

“My readings are available online and I link to them. The ability to seamlessly link through within the application is really important to students. For academics that have a lot of content, instead of having a three ring binder for class, if you organize your content in Blackboard, you are lined up and ready for class. There is great benefit to having all of your courses organized on a mobile device,” Jeff continues.

“Providing a higher level of technology tells our students ‘we know you are a contemporary learner with unique needs and we are prepared to meet you where you want to learn.’ A lot of students said the app helps them organize better. They have all their content on a single screen for all of their courses with a device that boots up quickly. They don’t want to start up a computer, launch a browser, go to the site...on a phone it’s much faster. This certainly ensures our university is competitive,” Jeff concludes.

Also luring students with the latest technology, capabilities, and convenience through Blackboard Mobile Learn is Queensland’s second oldest university, James Cook University (JCU).

Surrounded by the spectacular ecosystems of the rainforests of the wet tropics, the dry savannahs, and the iconic Great Barrier Reef, JCU is dedicated to creating a brighter future for life in the tropics world-wide, through graduates and discoveries that make a difference. One discovery that’s already making an impact for them is mobile.

Scott Bradey, Manager of Learning Technologies at JCU is responsible for providing advice at all levels on e-learning. He says, “JCU is taking great strides towards being more flexible so we can engage and retain more students. Combined with the Learning Technology group’s goals of accessible content, this means going mobile. Blackboard Mobile Learn has been a key tool that has brought all of our goals together.”

“We’ve been actively wanting to innovate and improve our suite of technologies. We’ve had quite a few requests to access Blackboard content on mobile devices. With Blackboard Mobile Learn we have a viable option to do that,” Scott continues. “We’ve been amazed at student uptake. We’ve had zero complaints about content not being available. Everyone can view all course content on their mobile device.”

Due to the popularity of ‘eLectures’ JCU wanted to ensure that digital media was accessible on mobile devices alongside the other materials in their Blackboard Learn course sites. They now provide a number of mobile delivery profiles for teaching staff to choose from when making their eLectures available to students. This means that that students can view a vodcast of the lecture in Blackboard Learn or download it onto their mobile device as easily as they can access their lecture notes and readings. Blackboard Mobile Learn is an asset as it allows students to
access that content in ways that take best advantage of the capabilities of their preferred mobile device.

An Australian study in 2008 showed that not only were 96% of students using mobile devices, but also that they were using them more to create and share information. Students take photos and video and can upload them and share them via text and social media sites.

The Learning Technologies group realized they needed to integrate this into curriculum. They wanted academic staff to purposefully design learning activities that allowed students to collaborate and communicate in authentic ways using their mobile devices. “We went over to the school of Medicine and one of the lecturers had just put his PDF up on Blackboard and the students were already paging through the notes on their mobile devices. It had been so effective and useful, and all he did was his normal activity of uploading notes to Blackboard Learn. I like that you can collaborate and interact with the course and peers,” says Scott.

All across the globe there is a range of attitudes and perceptions about how useful or intrusive making content available on mobile devices is. Yet there is no denying student demand. When students hear about flexible learning, they think digital content. They want information whenever they need it, wherever they are. Many students also work, so they need the flexibility Blackboard Mobile Learn can offer.

“Blackboard Mobile Learn is helping us bridge the gap between delivering better accessibility and mobility of our teaching and learning content and our overall need for improved flexibility,” says Scott. “When students are asked how flexible JCU is, having a mobile learning app can only be a good thing.”

Mobile is not a golden ticket. But it can open up incredible opportunities. For institutions like Bond University and James Cook University it can help attract and retain students. As we wait to discover mobile’s true affect on outcomes, almost everyone will agree that simply by making a student’s life more convenient—as mobile does—can improve their overall experience. And that can inevitably have an impact on any institution’s bottom line.

For institutions today, the growth rate of mobile devices and apps is impossible to ignore. In Australia alone there are significantly more mobile services than people. By 2013, mobile phones will overtake PCs as the most common Web access device.* Bond University and James Cook University are confronting these facts head-on and ensuring that their 21st century learners are able to learn on the devices they love.

Acceptance is inevitable when you have Gen Y students in classes. That is how they learn. It’s not just the one hour in the four walls of a classroom. They’re using it in their everyday life.

* It is helping us connect with them more effectively than the traditional ‘talk and chalk’ lecture. Now any place becomes a learning place,

Scott Bradey
Manager of Learning Technologies,
James Cook University