



Understanding the issues and benefits of personal tools and technologies

What are personal tools and technologies?

Personal tools and technologies are those owned by learners and not routinely supported by institutions. Learners in the JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning studies were found to be using a range of such tools alongside – and sometimes in preference to – institutionally provided technologies.

The tools most frequently cited were instant messaging, chat and social networking software, Skype, USB memory sticks, PDAs, digital audio players, such as iPods, and mobile phones. Many learners also use personal laptops.

These tools are selected for their familiarity and personal quality, their low cost and convenience. For example, higher education students in the LXP study use instant messaging and chat alongside email, because these tools are immediate, intimate and freely available to internet users. The LEX study shows learners turning to personal technologies to gain more choice and control over their learning, as pressures of time blur the boundaries between work, leisure, family commitments and learning.

Use of personal technologies is likely to become more widespread, as discerning, IT-competent learners, including those with disabilities and those who study remotely, increasingly seek to personalise their learning environment and integrate their own tools and technologies with those provided by the institution, making institutional provision for learning an increasingly complex matter.

Scope

In relation to the use of personal tools and technologies, this information sheet:

- defines key terms
- explores the benefits for learners
- outlines the issues for institutions
- explains how to find out more

Audience

This guidance is designed for:

- senior managers with responsibility for learning and teaching
- deans of faculty/heads of departments
- heads of e-learning/ILT
- network managers
- practitioners
- learning resources and learning support staff

‘Across all the subjects represented in the case studies, the students made extensive use of personally owned technologies, including mobile phones, laptop computers, personal digital assistants and USB memory sticks.’

LXP: Student Experiences of Technologies – Final report (Conole et al., 2006)

This information sheet forms part of *In Their Own Words*, a synthesis of the outcomes of Phase 1 of the Learner Experiences of e-Learning theme of the JISC e-Learning Programme. For further information: www.jisc.ac.uk/elp_learneroutcomes

“... one of my friends has thalidomide, but she can sit and type for hours because she’s got it set up so that it’s all here for her ...It’s nice if you can do it in your environment that’s set up for you and that you’re comfortable in ...”

Jenny, adult online learner: LEX study

Examples of personal tools and technologies used by learners in the JISC studies

The following tools were used by learners in the JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning studies. Examples of software are included to assist with further research.

The list cannot be seen as definitive. Links are given in the conclusion to further illustrations of the use of personal and mobile technologies for learning and of the potential impact of learners’ use of personal tools and technologies on institutional policy and provision. Social software is discussed separately in the Information sheet *Social software*.

Chat: Software that supports synchronous communication that is usually, but not exclusively, text-based

Example of software: www.paltalk.com

Digital audio players: Portable devices for playing compressed audio files, such as an iPod®, also known as MP3 players after the format used to encode downloadable sound files

Instant messaging software: Software that enables users to communicate in text format in real time over the internet. More immediate than email and valuable to those with hearing impairment, instant messaging also avoids the costs of phone calls or SMS text messaging

Examples of software: Microsoft® MSN® Messenger [www.msn.com]; Skype™ [www.skype.com]

Internet telephony: Also known as Voice over IP (VoIP), internet telephony refers to the use of the internet for voice conversations

Example of software: Skype [www.skype.com]

Laptops: The cost of purchasing a lightweight personal laptop is reducing year on year, resulting in more learners, especially in higher education, purchasing and setting up their own computers for learning

Mobile phones: Almost all learners in post-16 education own a mobile phone, many of which incorporate additional functions such as internet access, image and audio capture/play facilities. Texting via mobile phone reduces costs – on average, 4.1 million text messages are sent from mobile phones every hour in the UK

PDA: Abbreviation for personal digital assistants, handheld computers and personal organisers, sometimes known as a palmtops or smartphones. Some models include the functionality of a mobile phone, a web browser, email, a music player and a camera

USB memory sticks: Data storage devices that enable users to transfer content from one computer to another



“Instant messaging, e-mail and VoIP allow for instantaneous contact with group members/tutors without having to interrupt other tasks which I may be doing at the time ...”

Student: LXP study

Why is this information useful to me?

The findings of the JISC Learner Experiences of e-Learning studies indicate a trend away from the technologies learners perceive as institutionally owned towards an underworld of personal technology use, particularly for communication.

While much of this activity is learner-owned, it has implications for the future of institutional IT provision. Use of personal tools by learners transforms the relationship between institutions and learners, as dependence on a small number of institutionally owned technologies, such as VLEs, gives way to a greater diversity of options, instigated and managed by learners themselves. Some of the potential benefits for learners and issues for institutions and practitioners are outlined here.

What use of personal tools and technologies for learning could mean for learners

Personalised learning

- Using familiar tools adapted to individual needs
- Greater flexibility in when and where learning occurs
- Increased sense of ownership over the process of learning

Supported learning

- Gaining a sense of identity as a learner through the exercise of personal choice
- Accessing peer support when required, despite working in dispersed groups and communities
- Opportunities for ‘just-in-time’ learning via personal and mobile technologies

Skills for learning

- Choosing the most appropriate tool for the task from a range of options (email; VoIP; texting or instant messaging)

- Managing learning in the context of a demanding lifestyle (digital audio players while travelling; USB memory sticks)
- Maintaining a network of peers, friends and tutors (instant messaging; texting; internet access on the move)

What use of personal tools and technologies for learners could mean for institutions

Network and facilities issues

- Providing battery charging facilities (personal laptops; PDAs)
- Making USB drives accessible (USB memory sticks)
- Network security (VoIP; personal laptops)
- Bandwidth and JANET acceptable use compliance (Skype)
- Supporting learning on multiple tools and platforms (mobile technologies; VLEs)

Issues for practitioners

- Developing learners’ skills in working effectively and appropriately with informal technologies
- Designing and managing learning activities based on learners’ own choices of technology
- Offering learning content on a variety of platforms
- Ensuring that increased choice does not mean reduced quality of learning

Accessibility and personalisation

- Exploring ways in which personal tools and technologies can meet the needs of individual learners
- Providing a variety of routes to essential information
- Ensuring parity of access to tools and technologies for disadvantaged learners

Sources of further information

Conole, G., de Laat, M., Dillon, T. and Darby, J. (2006)
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