2015-8

College Life: Technology Assists all of the Shiny, 'apps' People

Mary O'Rawe
mary.orawe@dit.ie

Recommended Citation

Using apps to build a successful first-year experience:
Technology assists all the shiny, 'appy' people

"There's an app for that!" seems to be a common cry for just about every encounter. Education apps are becoming more popular with every academic year. In June 2015, Apple's App Store ranked education apps as their third most popular category. Considering too that ever-greater numbers of secondary students are entering the third-level environment having experienced an iPad as their main learning mechanism, it's clear that students will now expect a similarly 'smart' experience. As the number of smartphones among the college population also continues to grow, academia needs to work to connect with students through this medium.

Since Apple changed the game with the launch of their iPhone, the mobile phone has become a primary vehicle for driving content, and something akin to a third hand for all but older demographics. But many academics have been slow to view the learner's phone as anything other than a distraction, with some banning them entirely from the lecture hall. This mistrust is changing and needs to change further. With a balanced approach and responsibility by all parties, apps can enhance the learning environment, and provide all kinds of resources for students to aid their learning both in the college environs and in their own time.

At the pre-entry stage and early orientation to college, many universities and colleges have developed bespoke apps to communicate programme content, guide students around campus, facilitate easy connections to internal and external resources, and provide quick access to the all-important timetable. From the college's perspective, what would have been a costly exercise just a few years ago can now be developed in a matter of weeks with no need for advanced coding skills, and a budget of just a few hundred euros. D.I.T.'s *Get Smart!* and *Prep for D.I.T.* apps are examples of such bespoke apps developed specifically for first-year undergraduates and access students.

Apps can provide benefit in a wide range of areas, but the following themes offer a good start:

Organise yourself:
Meeting deadlines can be a real challenge in first-year. Students often struggle to beat procrastination, especially in a more independent learning environment. Many apps can help students balance a full academic schedule with a part-time job and social life. Apps such as *iProcrastinate* from the App Store can help with cracking those scheduling difficulties.
Tackling that individual assessment can be guided by specific apps for various stages of planning e.g. *Easybib* for writing up that all-important list of references.
A range of learning platforms are now also offered by colleges in app form, e.g. *Blackboard*, so students can access content while travelling.
Whilst assistive technology apps are geared towards students who have learning difficulties, these apps are useful for the whole student population. Ireland's own *UrAbility.com* can point learners and educators to the best app resources for a range of learning styles.

Engage yourself:
Academics give careful consideration to getting students to engage in class. We've all drifted off in a lecture or talk to find that we missed the main points. A range of great interactive techniques are now available, among the most popular being apps to facilitate multiple-choice quizzes around the

content just covered. *Socrative* is one of the best apps in this category, allowing students to test themselves in a fun and gently competitive environment, and offering a welcome break from listening to the lecturer!

Manage yourself and your group:
Much continuous assessment is group-based at college. You may already have mixed feelings about working in teams from your school experience. It will be important to your success to get your group dynamics sorted out productively.
Trello is a great app for project management, and team members can be added and progress tracked.

What about the lecturer perspective? Let's face it - many academic staff struggle to adapt to this new era of the "digital native". It's a huge learning curve, and not one that all academics feel they need to embrace, even if just to make us look more relevant and current!   Not all disciplines or learning environments are suitable for apps, and it's understandable that academics would proceed with a certain amount of ambivalence. However, apps have gained a new legitimacy in a third-level learning environment. Sites such as *Edshelf* and *Bloomin* can offer even the most sceptical some thought-provoking suggestions.