



To tablet or not to tablet?

ARE IPADS REALLY A TOOL FOR LEARNING AT UNIVERSITIES? UC RESEARCHERS FIND OUT

Are iPads the next big thing in making university students more digitally literate? Are tablets changing the way young people consume information? Will they eventually replace laptops? Or are they actually just a distraction?

Associate professor in communication Sora Park and assistant professor in knowledge and information studies Sally Burford set out to learn whether an increasing use of technology benefits university students' digital media literacy – the ability to access, understand and create content using digital media – and the ways in which they communicate.

"Technology access, use and skills are essential to communicate in an increasingly networked world and young people spend a tremendous amount of time and energy online," Dr Park says.

"However, it is not clear how much of that time is spent using technologies that benefit their digital media literacy and communication patterns.

This study examines how students use mobile tablet devices in their scholarly activities as well as their social lives."

The researchers recruited a group of 35 University of Canberra first and second year full-time students, aged between 18-25 years old. In August 2011, the participants – all tablet-user novices – were given an iPad to use freely, without any intervention for a year. All the students were able to keep the tablet at the end for taking part in the study.

The team measured the digital literacy levels of the participating students by using the method of self-report. This involved the use of an online community created specifically for the study, in which students completed surveys, answered questions regarding their interaction with their iPad and contributed to discussion forum topics.

The researchers discovered that the iPads didn't initially enhance the students' levels of digital media literacy, but they did improve them slightly across the year.

"After six months, the iPads didn't enhance the digital media literacy, which was quite surprising," Dr Park says. "However, by the end of the research period, there was an overall

increase of digital media literacy in all dimensions: access, understanding and creating.

"The largest area of increase was access to information. We found that the more the students used the tablets to search for information or study, they seemed to be able to improve their ability to analyse and critically assess digital content, as well as improve their knowledge of the various ways to find content."

The researchers also discovered that although 77 percent of the students said the tablet helped them study, most of the students also considered it a distraction because they could instantly use social media or endlessly surf the internet.

The study found that the students mainly used the iPad for news consumption, social media, watching movies, reading, and often as a second screen for browsing the Internet.

Dr Burford says the participants thought the size of the iPad was ideal as it was very portable. They also considered it a good sharing device, easy to read from and perfect for any type of light writing such as responding to emails or jotting down ideas.

"The characteristics of the iPad allowed an easy engagement with

the device: more so than a computer, laptop or a desktop. It was less daunting and more immediately available to them," Dr Burford says.

However, very few of them used it to write assignments or longer papers, and most noted that they would most probably use a desktop computer or laptop to write a longer piece of work.

The team established that significant shifts were also made in relation to accessing specific information with the iPad, through the use of applications.

"The real shift we saw is the use of apps to find information. The participants ended up with quite a customised and personalised interface for information seeking because they chose their apps," Dr Burford says. "The convenience of finding information directly, instead of searching the web, was really valued."

The study revealed that tablets are also changing the context of learning due to the constant access to information and the fact that they can physically take their learning device with them anywhere, anytime.

"People are not constrained to the library, a classroom or a desk to learn."

