

## **Apps in LD: gifts or gimmicks?**

**Amy West**

University of Northampton, UK

### ***Presentation abstract***

In 'one-shot' Learning Development (LD) teaching, how much space is there for using apps (and similar technologies) creatively? Can they further students' understanding and enable active learning within workshops; is there even potential for using them in tutorials? What barriers are there to their use, how could we remove these, and indeed should we – is there enough to be gained or are they just a gimmick?

This Wild Card session was an opportunity to collaboratively explore the potential of a selection of apps and technologies which are used in other areas of education, and consider whether they can augment provision in LD. The apps and programmes chosen for this session were used in an international Erasmus+ research project, which worked with lecturers, teachers, students, and school children who observed their strengths and limitations in use (Digital Learning Across Boundaries: Developing Changemakers (DLAB), 2017-2022). This Wild Card session looked to evaluate how these apps might be applied in the LD world by reviewing benefits and barriers to their use in an LD context, and considering how we might maximise any usefulness and contend with limitations or concerns. I wanted to explore how they might support transition through familiarity and links with previous education experiences, and whether the activities which use them might impact on belonging. Participants were encouraged to evaluate and share their thoughts on the apps, and collectively generate a resource of ideas as to their use in LD. This resource could then be shared and drawn on by others.

**Keywords:** apps; technology; digital; wild card.

## ***Community response***

The nature of Wild Card presentations is that anything can happen – the sessions are often creative or provocative enough to surprise the participants, but the presenters may be equally unprepared for the audience's response. Such was the case at this session, with the participants preoccupied more with discussing the merits of technology than with using it – something the presenter had planned the activities around. Instead of undermining the intended structure, however, the spontaneous conversational flow seemed to enrich it. This was enabled by the relaxed and positive atmosphere created by the fairly small and intimate group of attendees who felt comfortable discussing different ways in which the apps presented could work, and the contexts in which they would be useful. One participant identified the curiosity evident in the participants; this contributed to the 'genuinely collaborative' nature of the session and its 'broad-ranging and reflective discussion'.

The session was organised around three different apps: Padlet (web-based and not requiring a download) for collecting and commenting on ideas; Keynote (app-based and not requiring a download) for making and sharing GIFs; and Scavenger (app-based and requiring a download) for treasure-hunting and storytelling. The highly nuanced conversations around these apps highlighted that technology should never be used for technology's sake but rather decisions around application should concentrate on utility and value. This is particularly critical when apps come with difficulties and barriers (Image 1), and it is important to consider the learner's experience and digital safety first. As one participant commented:

All three technologies are usable. I hadn't really thought about the impact of getting the students to sign up to different apps and the data management implication. Very thought provoking.

**Image 1. Presenter's slide: 'I see barriers!'**

**I see barriers!**

- Are companies 'okay'? How do they use data etc?
- Not asking folk to download
- Access to iPads
- Unsupported by university?
- 'One-shot' experiences vs ongoing connection




UN University of Northampton

Conversely, the participants had many innovative ideas regarding less obvious purposes of the apps and the ways they could be accessed and used to offer the most for learning (Image 2).

**Image 2. Presenter's slide: 'How might they be used?'**

**How might they be used?**

- Tutorials/workshops
- Pre-/post-session learning
- Asynchronous standalone resources

UN University of Northampton

Everyone seemed to agree, however, that where there were opportunities to use the apps in teaching, they were quite narrow as most apps were very useful in one particular way. For example, GIFs could be created for either providing talking points or encouraging reflection, consolidation or review, but their applicability felt less broad than the ever-present and flexible Padlet. Familiar to everyone in the session, the latter was met with the most positive reactions, especially as the presenter focused on the less known and more exciting aspects of the platform. Scavenger seemed attractive but also frustrating due to the barriers posed by the way the app works, especially the need to download it, which for many facilitators may be an uncomfortable request to make of learners. Additionally, it was pointed out by one participant that the process needed to be able to use these apps could be long. When apps are not supported by the institution, it is also important to remember about our duty of care to the students when it comes to our own technological competence and the level of support we can offer.

Ultimately, the discussion focused on how to ensure that technologies enhance learning rather than get in the way of learning. The session provided a space for an exploration of that central idea.

### **Next steps and additional questions**

It is undeniable that not only students but many educators use mobile apps and web-based platforms for learning and teaching, although few guides and resources exist to support such educational activities. This may be due to the changeable nature of technology, among other valid reasons, but it does not help us to evaluate which apps are worth our time, which is why this session was so valuable to the participants. It seems that more focus on technology and guidance for learning developers on apps would be of benefit to the community, especially if such apps can increase collaboration and inclusivity. It might be a good idea to update older criteria for evaluating digital resources (for example, Trinkle and Merriman, 2006) from the LD perspective and create a bank of apps relevant to the LD context. Actively sharing learning developers' experiences with using apps to enhance teaching and learning could lead to interesting collaborations on projects that promote LD as a site of digital innovation and creativity.

## ***Author's reflection***

This workshop grew from my feeling that these technologies had potential for learning in LD, but that when I went to plan for their use, I kept finding barriers. The Wild Card session was a valuable opportunity to explore the technologies within the community, and to gain from participants' viewpoints and ideas, as well as to share something which may be useful to others.

I was delighted that the session took a conversational direction; this enabled us to evaluate the apps and technologies through the varied perspectives of the attendees. Sharing perceived barriers and benefits from our own contexts helped to situate the apps in LD and enabled us to consider how best the apps may be used.

I agree that actively sharing experiences with a variety of apps and technologies within the community would enrich understanding, and may help to demystify and remove some barriers. It would be fascinating to hear what people are using in their LD practice, and, crucially, how they are using it.

## ***Acknowledgments***

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience.

The author did not use AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

## ***References***

Digital Learning Across Boundaries: Developing Changemakers (DLAB) (2017-2022)

DLAB. DLAB [online]. Available at: <https://mypad.northampton.ac.uk/dlaberasmus/>  
(Accessed: 3 January 2023).

Trinkle, D., and Merriman, S. (2006) *History highway: a 21st century guide to internet resources*. 4<sup>th</sup> edn. New York: M.E. Sharpe.

## ***Author details***

Amy West is a Learning Development Tutor at the University of Northampton. She has an MA in Education, and holds Fellowship of the HEA and ALDinHE CeP. Amy's research interests centre on the use of metaphor in learning and teaching.

## ***Licence***

©2023 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).