
Is it too Soon to Mention Christmas?

Christmas is a time for gifts of all sizes, shapes and colours with even more choices of wrapping paper, cards and ribbons. It can be an overwhelming blur of choice when trying to match the right present to the right person. A similar dilemma can exist with technology. As app stores increase their selections, the search for suitable apps to support students can be lengthy and tedious. This can lead to a type of technologybased Stendhal syndrome, where the kaleidoscope of choices can be dizzying, deterring some people from exploring the possibilities of technology. To help alleviate this issue Frances Boylan, eLearning Development Officer in Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT), developed an initiative called **The 12 Apps of Christmas**.

December 2015 marked the second year of the 12 Apps project which ran over a two and a half week period, offering free educational app suggestions as starting points to hook students and educators. These 12 free apps were pitched to appeal to the differing learning styles of students and to place students at the centre of their learning experience. The website provided a page for students that explained what personalising their learning means. A link to a [VARK](#) (visual, aural, read/write, kinesthetic) learning styles questionnaire was also provided and the students were encouraged to fill in the questionnaire to determine their preferred learning style. It was also suggested that they then take some time to categorise their results for themselves with regard to how they prefer to 'access information, 'engage with information', and 'express their understanding of information'. Examples were provided to help them undertake this task.

Each day's app came with a review page to explain the purpose of the app, the links to download the app and its basic functions. The added value provided every day was that each app was also evaluated in terms of how learners could match the qualities of the app to their visual, auditory, read/write and kinesthetic learning strengths.

Frances Boylan invited me to collaborate with her to advocate technology not only for students with disabilities but for all students and staff regarding practical educational solutions using commonly owned devices. As an Assistive Technology Officer in DIT I see that computers, laptops, tablets and smartphones have become ubiquitous and an intrinsic part of the education culture. A concept that the 12 Apps project embraced this year centred around the 'personalisation of learning' with technology, moving away from labelling students and instead onto labelling a learning approach that in this case involves technology.

The personalised learning approach empowers students to individualise their learning experiences to address 'specific learning needs, interests, aspirations or cultural backgrounds' (Abbot, 2014b).

The diversity of freely available apps allows students to meet a range of educational needs, including having text read out to them on their devices, planning their time, managing workloads, enhancing their note-taking, as well as aiding in essay writing and even providing strategies to manage procrastination.

Personalized learning is a reaction against standardized, mass-produced and one-size fits all education

The range of high quality and free apps makes them accessible to students in higher education. For example, Google has added a new dictation feature to Google Docs to further support more flexibility for students. Microsoft has made their range of applications free to higher education students including the OneNote application for note taking and organisation. Such explosion of choice means that students can try new technologies. If a solution doesn't match the student's learning style and lifestyle they can move on and try another. Rather than a 'one size fits all' approach, now there is more of an 'at least one size will fit' approach, that can create a more productive and hopefully more positive student experience.

Writers like Gerstein argue that technology has developed so much that we now refer to the integration of technology into our learning, teaching and assessment practices as Education 3.0. This is a more of a heutagogical, connectivist approach to teaching and learning.

Education 3.0 recognizes that each educator's and student's journey is unique, personalized and self-determined (Gerstein, 2014).

This connectivist approach in particular can have an added benefit for students. As some students own a mixture of mobile and portable devices, the flexibility of technology can cross over enhancing functionality and ease of use. For example, apps like 'EasyBib' are available as Android and Apple apps as well as being web-based or as an add-on to Google docs. Such multimodal accessibility enables students to create bibliographies across all their devices. This flexibility adds to student productivity as adaptable devices offer greater independence, whereby students can work seamlessly on a common goal. Users can also now create their own app palettes through a pick n' mix approach to technology, such as note taking with OneNote, creating presentations with Google Slides and using Pocket to collect their bookmarks across all devices. Students are no longer tied into purchasing an Apple-only or a Windows-only technology arsenal.

This growing fluidity in technology empowers students not only to select their preferred devices but to fill them with their preferred apps, giving them more control over their learning.

This concept of personalisation can also have benefits for the transition from college to the workplace.

We need to develop learners who are skilled at personalising their learning, as the changing nature of knowledge means this is a fundamental skill for today's workforce (Olsen, 2011).

Personalisation leads to a more intrinsic need for learners to engage with technology and the skills that are created from this need can increase digital literacy as well as be transferred to future technologies and applications in the

workplace. As an immediate and long term approach it has personal and societal benefits as confident learners can become confident contributors to society.

Although the focus of the 12 Apps initiative centered on personalisation which is relatively new, the response to the contents of the website and accompanying apps was overwhelming. The website had just under 15,000 hits and the app had approximately 700 downloads, with the Twitter following reaching just under 2,000. This was a dramatic 300% increase from the first year of the project which had 700 participants.

While it may have been aimed primarily at students, educators too had a role to play in providing the kind of environment that encourages personalisation. A resources page for educators was developed which explained the benefits of personalised learning and provided useful tips and hints. The registration sheet showed about one third of students and two thirds of educators participated in the project. These worldwide participants shared their app experiences via comments on the website or on Twitter using the #12AppsDIT hashtag. The concept of personalisation struck a chord with participants and was an indicator of the growing interest in flexible and tailored learning experiences, enhanced and facilitated by technology.

Collaborating on the 12 Apps initiative did open my eyes to the varying ways technology can increase the possibilities for students in accessing, engaging and expressing themselves through technology. It also revealed how attitudes to technology are rapidly changing. For example, the '**bring your own device**' (BYOD) approach supports educators to use devices and apps in the teaching environment that take advantage of smartphone ownership to enhance student engagement in the learning environment.

Needless to say I am a fan of personalised learning and I see great potential for it to support all types of abilities. However I do wonder if students have yet fully embraced this connectivist and personalised approach. I meet with students daily and from my experience I have seen only a small number of students recognising and applying this personalised learning approach via technology. I am only beginning to explore how to pitch this approach to students and I hope to develop material to teach students about the benefits of personalisation in the near future.

If you haven't yet experienced this festive themed initiative, the 12 Apps website www.dit.ie/the12appsofchristmas can be accessed at any time to learn more about personalisation in learning and apps that can support it. The '12AppsDIT' app is also available via Google Play and iTunes.

Apps are still new to the education scene and have yet to fully flourish so more remains to be discovered about their growing place in the learning and teaching space. I think it is safe to say that **apps are not just for Christmas, they're for lifelong learning.**



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This article appeared in the AHEAD Journal. Visit www.ahead.ie/journal for more information
