

MUITEL: an ethical perspective

Background

In a time of rapid technological change, educators face increasingly complex challenges in attempting to use digital devices to enhance learning. People of all ages engage with personal technologies to learn in new ways in the home, at work and while on the move.

Where does TEL research come in?

TEL research can help us better understand the pros and cons of technology for education and help us use them effectively in sustainable, exciting, and robust ways.

Three TEL projects — **Inter-Life**, **Personal Inquiry**, and **Ensemble** — have examined these issues, and produced a research briefing on their findings.

MUITEL = Mobile, Ubiquitous and Immersive Technologies

Mobile and ubiquitous devices, such as mobile phones and iPads allow learners to engage in educational activities in almost any context.

Virtual worlds can create realistic and sustained *'immersion'* in educational environments, transcending formal curricula and suggesting new vistas of interaction already glimpsed in online gaming.

The Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) programme

- We aim to understand and develop the roles of digital technologies in improving the quality of learning and teaching.
- £12m in funding from ESRC/EPSC
- Runs from 2007 to 2012
- 8 major projects, 7 development projects
- Director: Richard Noss
- www.tlrp.org/tel

The ethical dimension

TEL research is exciting, but also challenging and complex. As technology reveals the possibilities for merging the formal and informal, researchers and teachers are presented with new ethical issues.

Focus and aims of the research

The TEL MUITEL team surveyed 12 major international organisations, as well as journals and 'grey' literatures for relevant ethics guidelines. They aimed to:

- Propose ethical dimensions of researching MUITEL in the wider context of the digital economy;
- Examine recent literature on ethics in TEL to identify key trends, ethical dilemmas, and issues for researchers; and
- Make recommendations about the management of ethics in MUITEL research for further debate among researchers and practitioners.

Some emerging themes

Attachment

Young people become attached to devices, so asking participants to engage with devices and then asking for the devices back after a project could be upsetting. Conversely, young people may be reluctant to take loaned devices, or to store personal information on them.

Privacy



Requiring learners to use their own mobile phones or laptops may encroach on the learners' personal and social world. Researchers have to use great sensitivity and seek informed permission.

(continued overleaf)

Emerging themes (continued)

Participant Behaviour

MUITEL offers the possibility of new forms of bad behaviour, such as cyber-bullying, offensive texting and inappropriate use of images. The subtlety of such behaviour may mean it goes unnoticed by researchers.

Informed Consent

If researcher and participant only meet in virtual worlds, negotiating terms of consent could be difficult.

Appropriate Researcher Behaviour

In investigating virtual world interactions adults may have to identify themselves to gain informed consent, collect data and deal with bad behaviour. Which adults (moderators, teachers, researchers?) are acceptable as participants in, and viewers of, child-oriented communities?

Unmonitored Spaces and Informal Interactions

Researchers may collect data from physical or virtual spaces that are unmonitored by teachers. What are the ethical responsibilities for researchers witnessing behaviour such as fighting or bullying?

What constitutes harm?

The organisations reviewed highlighted the need to 'above all do no harm'. The definition of harm entails a complex mixture of moral, legal and personal criteria. This could cause problems for MUITEL research with its capacity to straddle traditional research boundaries and encroach into the private and social worlds of young people.



MUITEL and formal education

There is a growing divide between the seamless flow of activities (embracing school work and informal learning) that children have at home, and the prohibition of tools such as Facebook in the classroom.

Creative use of MUITEL in formal education has been slow off the mark, generally attempting to bolt technology on to traditional practices rather than allowing new technology to transform curriculum or assessment radically.

MUITEL and the Digital Economy

Researching new forms of interaction enabled by personal and social digital technologies is critical in developing the creative economy and the wider 'digital society.'

Emerging social networking technologies can affect:

- Consumer choice and awareness
- Safe and creative online social interactions
- The kinds of goods and services demanded
- The economic and social behaviour of increasing sections of the digital economy.

Because all aspects people's lives can now be digitally manipulated so easily, digital connectedness not only casts people as perpetual consumers, it could also potentially shift the nature of social relations (including those of education and health), linking them more inextricably to economic relations.

Conclusions

Research into innovative and informal uses of MUITEL raises ethical challenges.

MUITEL research is significant if the gap between informal digital practices and education is not to fracture completely.

Despite the challenges, the possibilities may lead to innovations in educational policy and practice, hence there is a great incentive to further research in this area.



For more on the
TEL Ethics in
MUITEL work see
www.tlrp.org/tel