Empowering Users One Pixelated Word at a Time

Michelle Wong

#18535039

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University of British Columbia

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Power for Peters



 In the beginning, there was a dusty dictionary at the back of the classroom waiting patiently for the next student to bend its pages in search of the Holy Grail - *the word*.  The long trek to this mecca of words and source of knowledge was often seen as a sign of weakness - an academic weakness.  Today, the paper dictionary has become somewhat of a lost artifact; in its place, the present successor is the dictionary mobile app (or mobile application).  The dictionary mobile app is an example of how Educational Technology can *empower* people: creating learning opportunities, improving literacy, and, most importantly, removing the stigma behind learning.

 The dictionary mobile app, with gaining popularity in the 2000s, is an application software that is designed to help users perform specific tasks related to literacy.  It can be powered with or without Internet connection on handheld devices, like smart phones, personal digital assistants, tablet computers, and portable media players; it can be accessed anywhere and everywhere.  The app is either pre-installed on the device or downloaded by the user for free or for a variety of prices (e.g. $1.99-$29.99).  It is also user-friendly and varied in languages: English, French, Spanish, and Chinese.  Prominent dictionaries, like *Merriam-Webster* or *Oxford English*, offer their own versions in application form, which allow users to easily mimic their actions of using a physical dictionary with a mobile electronic version instead.

 To understand the essentiality of the dictionary app, imagine a room filled with people. Imagine not knowing how to spell a word or coming across a foreign word. The first instinct may be to perspire and panic – *flight or fight*. The second instinct may be to surrender and expose the uncertainty. The third instinct may be to ignore the situation and live in ambiguity. Not knowing a word creates an opportunity for ridicule and judgment. The competence or incompetence of an individual can be generalized within seconds. Now imagine pulling out a smart phone or portable media player. With a tap of a finger, the dictionary app opens and the glorious answer to previous fears emerges: the definition, the grammar (e.g. verb, noun), the pronunciation, the synonyms and antonyms, and the different examples of how to use the word correctly in a sentence. Having the instinct of reaching for the app can alleviate the negative emotions connected to learning. These negative emotions can now be solved through the multiple features of a dictionary mobile app: a word search function (also available through microphone function), a word prompt revealing similar words, and a “Word of the Day” for learning new words.

 The phone has now become an extension of the human; we can depend on its existence to make our lives easier. With the addition of the dictionary mobile app, any word has become searchable, and humans have become more knowledgeable. Users do not need to hide behind the words anymore. Instead, the dictionary mobile app can empower people in more ways than one. The words and meanings learned from the app increase literacy, and literacy is vital in ensuring the success of a person in the future. The dictionary app is “not simply teaching the language but teaching a way of living and a mode of existence” (as cited in Weiguo, 2011, p.297). The daily essential tasks of reading and writing can become less of a burden or challenge; the user transforms from a person filled with fear and frustration to a person of confidence. With the knowledge gained, users become aware of their individual power. This result leads to a positive self-concept and improved self-efficacy. Reading motivation contributes to reading comprehension and being successful at school (Ülper, 2011). Students need to be motivated to learn, and difficult words can be discouraging. Therefore, this improved confidence encourages users to take initiative and ownership over their own lives; users becoming people of action rather than inaction.

 The dictionary app is changing the way students view learning. Instead of “not knowing”, people direct themselves towards omniscience. Users are simply using educational technology to simplify and improve their lives. With the dictionary app, empowerment is in their hands.

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