

Mobility Shifts Presentation
“Sometimes I Type Papers on my Cell Phone:”
Mobile Digital Technologies and CUNY Students

1. TITLE

Good afternoon, I'm Maura Smale and this is Mariana Regalado, and today we're going to talk about the integration of mobile technologies into the academic lives of students at the City University of New York.

2. USHEP

The research we're sharing today is part of our ethnographic study of the scholarly habits of undergraduate students at CUNY. Over the past two years we've interviewed 180 students and 60 faculty members at six different CUNY colleges to explore how and where students do their schoolwork, and faculty expectations for their students' work. Since we are academic librarians, we are also interested in how students are using the library (or not). Students also took photos and drew maps and pictures, some of which you can see here, and we have compiled a large and rich pool of data.

3. CUNY = NYC

Just a few demographics to start: as you can see, the student population at CUNY is a snapshot of the population of New York City as a whole. CUNY is the largest public university in the U.S., offers access to college that might otherwise be unavailable to many students, and has an incredibly diverse student population.

4. CUNY COMMUTES

CUNY students are mobile by default: only a very small number of CUNY students live in residence halls. The rest commute to school, often over long distances using multiple modes of transportation.

For most CUNY students returning home during the day is not an option – they rely on their backpacks (which is perhaps the ultimate mobile technology) to carry the things they need with them.

And even the students who live in dorms must sometimes commute to campus – some dorms are not physically located near the college.

5. MOBILE TECH BY THE NUMBERS

However, a quick look at national and institutional surveys shows us that there are differences: CUNY students own and use mobile technology considerably less than the national average – they own fewer mobile devices, and go online with them less frequently.

6. WHAT STUDENTS SHOWED US

Through their maps, photographs, and interviews, students showed us how mobile technologies fit in to their lives. We found a wide range of access to technology and learned a lot about the constraints students feel, and how mobile technologies do and don't serve to alleviate some of those constraints.

We feel that the myth of the digital native is alive and well at CUNY. For some students the digital mobile world is a burden to be avoided, for others it is about managing the best they can, and for a few it is about embracing all the technology has to offer. (And it is even all three for some!)

7. CELL PHONES AND SMARTPHONES

Unsurprisingly, we found that students were very attached to their cell phones and smartphones. But students also shared a wide range of experiences with these technologies:

- Some students had the very smartest of phones – iphones, blackberrys, etc. – and reported that they are constantly connected via email, facebook, etc.
- There were students with smartphones who only used the phone and texting functions, some because of the cost of a data plan, though others were uninterested in using email on the phone.
- We met students with pre-paid cell phones, a few of whom we even lost contact with briefly when they ran out of minutes. This seemed largely based on financial need – these students could not afford to pay a monthly fee.
- Finally, we spoke with a few students who did not have a cell phone or smartphone at all.

8. LAPTOPS

While most students we interviewed didn't own laptops at all, even those that did often didn't bring them to campus for a variety of reasons, most commonly that laptops are too heavy to carry all day. These students literally weighed their options when deciding whether or not to bring laptops to campus with them.

Interestingly, an ethnographic study of students at the University of Rochester in 2007 found similar results, even though most of those students lived on campus, while CUNY students typically have substantial commutes.

9. OTHER MOBILE ACADEMIC TECH

Beyond phones and laptops, we spoke with some students who used mobile technologies specifically for academic purposes.

Some used their phones to keep themselves organized for school – either built-in calendars or access to online calendars and alarms to remind them to study, hand in papers, go to class, and even wake up!

One of the most surprising discoveries of our study was learning that some students type papers on their smartphones on the subway. This was confirmed by a faculty member who reported that he sometimes receives assignments from students via email with the *sent from my phone* signature.

We also met 2 students who use ereaders to support their coursework. One converts course-related PDFs so he can read them on his Kindle on the subway. He has also found ways to highlight text and make exportable annotations in the Kindle. In part he did this for convenience, but also in part because he found he liked reading on the Kindle.

10. ACCESS ISSUES

However, students also spoke of a variety of constraints on their access to mobile technologies. We found that across the board students needed access to computers and printers on campus – not in spite of their mobility, but because of it.

We met one student who had no computer at home and only a “dumbphone” without internet access. Her frustration was palpable – in the college computer labs certain leisure-related websites like Facebook were blocked, so she ended up using computers at the public library. There are other options on campus that she hadn’t yet discovered (she was a first-semester freshman), but it was clear that she was unhappy with the technological restrictions she experienced.

Many students do not have access to a printer at home, and use the printers at the college for their assignments. Some mentioned that their professors will not accept assignments via email. And even students who do have a printer at home will often come to campus to print if printing is free, which it is at some (but not all) CUNY colleges.

Overall, students were frustrated by computing and printing options on campus. They often complained about long lines to use these services, and especially about their fellow students using computers for fun or goofing around when there was a line of students waiting to use computers for their coursework or just to print!. The computer labs are often noisy, and in some places the computers are non-functional.

11. NO MOBILE TECH BY CHOICE

A few of the students we interviewed did not have cell phones by choice: they did not want cell phones.

These students stay in touch via email and using Google Chat between classes on the computer kiosks scattered around the college campus. One expressed that she felt that she had more control over her time, and that if she had a cell phone she would be at the beck and call of her friends.

Given the frustrations reported by many other students trying to find a computer on campus, the essentially positive attitude of these students towards the availability (and functionality) of on-campus computers is frankly more surprising than the fact that they don't own a cell phone. The public machines that the second student refers to are actually kiosks, which are available at many (but not all) CUNY colleges. While apparently convenient, the lack of lines for these computers is a testament to their usual non-functionality.

12. ENCOURAGING MOBILE TECH

As we've seen, CUNY students' range of technological access, use, and fluency is wide. Our data suggest that although some CUNY students take full advantage of their mobility, others are constrained by it. With the use of mobile devices and tools in higher education increasing and shifting at a rapid pace, it is important to note that some college students may be changing and adapting at a somewhat different rate.

What does this mean for instructors? Our students are not uniformly prepared to participate in mobile digital pedagogy. We heard from students that they can and will integrate mobile digital technology into their academic lives when it is feasible and makes sense to them, and they see how it supports their learning. Instructors can find ways to encourage students to use mobile digital technologies during their college careers, and help address these disparities in access, use, and fluency.