



# **Innovations Workshops**

**Young people, health and technology**

**Focus document**

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November 2004

*A group of teenagers are standing outside a local shop when a text message appears on Jon's phone, triggered by the fact that his heart rate has been at 'resting' level for the majority of the day. The message shows that a new game is beginning at a nearby park and the group moves off to join in. A separate message appears on Jayne's phone as her monitor records that she has not become involved in the activity. The information given to her is about the favourite activity that she had previously indicated through text and her earlier activity choices.*

The Futurelab Innovation workshop series is designed to bring together experts from research, practice and the creative industries to investigate how technology can impact upon learning in 5, 10, and 15 years time. This workshop focused upon how technologies can be developed and applied to aid learning of health issues, to enable young people to develop a 'health conscience' and to make appropriate healthy lifestyle choices. By creating an opportunity for these diverse groups to share their understanding from their own professional perspectives, we are creating a variety of scenarios of the future possibilities of learning technologies.

## **Current technology**

There are various technologies that are used in health education and other areas of development within the health sector. A wide variety of sensory technology is already available: heart rate monitors are used by athletes and sports enthusiasts alike as are pedometers and body-fat monitors. Other technologies include the use of hand-held computers by trainee doctors, the use of VLEs to support community learning, CD-Roms and DVDs to support more traditional classroom activities in PHSE and health studies.

## **Key themes**

Central to the workshop was the theme that in order to integrate healthy lifestyle choices consistently more than simply 'knowing' about health related issues is necessary. The ability to fuse the activities from the social sphere with those within the family, school and sporting spheres is vital. Two examples given were:

- young people who are gifted in particular sports who need to be able to merge pressures from peers, family and school with their sporting ambitions in order to succeed
- the classroom knowledge that needs to be applied in other spheres: social/peer, family life and work/practice.

The tensions in understanding between these spheres can provide a barrier to taking classroom knowledge and applying it to lifestyle choices. This is a particular barrier that was addressed during the workshop. The workshop highlighted some factors that could overcome these tensions:

- creating real reasons for changing lifestyle/starting activity
- finding new ways of being social and active together
- finding space for mixing social space with activity.

A key target area for encouraging a more active lifestyle is young people between 14 and 19, a period where developing a sense of self is a particular issue. Providing learning opportunities that encourage the development of 'self' to include healthy lifestyle choices, is an opportunity that needs to be addressed by those involved in designing learning contexts and tools for learning.

Another key area of learning that influences lifestyle choices is coping skills and risk education.

By developing mechanisms for coping with stress and being able to deal more positively with situations, young people are empowered to make more appropriate lifestyle choices.

The workshop highlighted the importance of enabling factual understanding of the constituent parts of a healthy meal, the benefits of exercise and methods of dealing with problems, such as 'coping skills' that enable young people to be informed in their lifestyle choices. In addition to these traditional areas of the curriculum is the need for young people to be given the opportunity to find ways of taking this knowledge and putting it into practice. Healthy lifestyle choices are made easier to take when they can be embedded in a way that fits with natural lifestyle choices: to fit in with social and school commitments.

## **Opportunities**

The workshop identified the opportunity provided to technology developers to investigate translating the skills of nurturing that can be seen with technologies such as Tamagotchi, Furbees and the Sims, into real life. Designing tools (both social and technological) that allow young people to transfer the understanding that they show when playing with such games into the real world is a task that faces designers of learning contexts and technologies for learning.

Another key theme that emerged during the day was the need to provide information that is contextual, factual and understandable. There are a variety of sensors that already record information; the need for future development is to find methods of making this information easy to interpret and act upon.

The Food Dudes project, run at Bangor, University of Wales showed how the relationship between incentive, peer modelling, clear personalised data and reward can be used to alter the food and exercise choices of primary school children. The use of pedometers gave students targets and easily interpretable data; the motivation was provided by the peer modelling. This formula appears appropriate in changing the lifestyle choices within school; the next phase is to investigate how this change can be transferred to actions taken in home/social spheres. This perhaps is an area in which mobile technologies can assist.

During the meeting, the blue-skies thinking suggested that technologies that allowed users to self-monitor their health by receiving personal, appropriate and immediate information would be a valuable resource in aiding young people to make appropriate lifestyle choices. This suggestion was taken further with the use of visualisation technologies being used to show long term effects of short-term actions, using current data to show a possible future in terms of health.

The main findings of the workshop showed that developing a health conscience is an example of where technologies could aid learners in their choice-making. Providing relevant information, advice and feedback is something that technologies can achieve; the challenge for designers of such technologies is to find ways of ensuring that they can be used easily and appropriately within daily routines.

## **Linked resources**

Food dudes: [www.fooddudes.co.uk](http://www.fooddudes.co.uk)