Mobile Copac

The new Copac was launched on the 1st May 2012, with a new interface designed to facilitate easier navigation on mobile devices such as smartphones and tablets. This new interface is the result of extensive user research and user interface design. Here's our story.

Mobile at Mimas — a quick history

We've been monitoring the uptake of mobile technology and its impact on education for over five years. One of the first Mimas mobile developments was the mobile friendly version of our Hairdressing Training service, which proved popular with users and went on to win an award for innovation at the Handheld Learning Awards in 2008. The success of this site initiated further projects at Mimas, including the Intute Mobile Internet Detective project, which took an online tutorial and redeveloped it for mobiles.

The decision to develop more mobile friendly sites was informed both by secondary data and the analysis of our own primary user data. Throughout this time we monitored mobile usage on Google Analytics for all of our services, carried out user research and collated external evidence from sources such as professional conferences and the 2010 Horizon Report which highlighted mobile computing as a technology which was going to be adopted by the teaching and learning community within the next year.

The most compelling evidence for the growing mobile trend came from our own users, and in particular from the market research we conducted for the Mobile Internet Detective in 2009/10. This revealed that, although students were not using the mobile web extensively for academic research, they would use the mobile Internet for their academic work if:

- their phones had larger screens

- it was quick and easy to load and navigate Web sites

- it was cheaper or free (included in their contract) to access the Internet

In 2009, most of our focus group participants were not smartphone users, but there was a definite desire to upgrade. Towards the end of 2010, whilst conducting studies with research students we asked what phones they used and how important mobile accessibility was to them. In a nutshell, it was clear that barriers to uptake highlighted by the Mobile Internet Detective Research were no longer significant. In the space of just two years, our users had upgraded to smartphones and now expected every website they visited to be mobile accessible.

Clearly, our services needed to be mobile.

Making Copac mobile

With Copac undergoing re-engineering and a website redesign in 2011, it made sense to look at mobile accessibility of the site as part of this process, especially when we saw that the number of hits from mobile users had grown exponentially. For example the month of March 2010 showed that Copac was accessed by a mobile device on 198 separate occasions. This is less than 1% of total visits to Copac for March, but for the same month a year later, (2011) Copac received a total of 367 visits from mobile devices. Admittedly this is still less than 1% of total visits, but still represents a dramatic increase.

With the re-engineering underway, we began investigating the various options for services to achieve mobile friendliness.

The Technology

Following the user requirements gathering exercise for the mobile development, the technical team took the findings and developed a responsive mobile design for the alpha version of Copac. This design used HTML5 and CSS to 'rearrange' the web page depending on the size of the screen, and was optimised to allow users to interact with alpha.Copac from multiple smartphone devices and tablets. Users would see a different arrangement of screen elements depending on the device.

Asking the users

We tested the prototype mobile Copac site with 10 postgraduate students in August 2011. This consisted of a focus group and in depth user testing exercises with students using their own personal smartphones.

These researchers rated the usability of the mobile interface highly, and the overall experience of the Copac website was positive, the majority scoring it as 'it is nice' and it was 'totally easy' or 'quite easy to use'.

As with our previous user research, reactions to using mobile devices were mixed. Research, for them, was not done on an adhoc basis, but required much planning and organising. They tended to set aside specific time to browse resources on the internet and acquired the resources they needed to do this - a computer, a desk, notepads and reference books. Access via a smartphone was seen as convenient for those last minute panics, but not the access choice of preference when serious research is required. On a practical level the small screen alone is a big put off for serious research sessions.

> *'I would certainly use this if I could not get access to a computer, but if I could easily access a computer that would be preferred over using my phone'.* Mobile user tester Copac, August 2011.

However, a small minority used their smartphones above all other devices and didn't see screen size as an issue. They had familiarised themselves with the small screen using other websites and were prepared to persevere to get information quickly and at their convenience.

> *'It's a great idea and it works well. Good if you can't get access to a computer and saves time if speed is important to you'.* Mobile user tester Copac, August 2011.

All of the volunteers that took part in the user testing, had used their smartphones to access the internet to varying degrees. But although the majority still preferred to browse on their computers if given a choice, none of the testers said that they would never use Copac on their mobile. In fact, the majority said that they might find a mobile Copac useful and a small minority couldn't wait to use it.

Although there was commonality between the groups, (that they all at some point had used a mobile site), all groups had individuals who were high end users and early adopters of technology and others in the groups who enjoyed their phone but, always returned to a computer when available.

Future proofing.

In March 2012 Copac received 1,303 separate visits from mobile devices – an increase of over 500% since March 2010. Visitors to the site via mobile devices are also staying on Copac for longer and viewing more pages whilst they are there and, significantly, they're also using different devices. By far the most popular mobile device used to access Copac this year is the Apple iPad – a device that is, perhaps, more suited to the demands of research than a smartphone.

Attitudes and opportunities to access the internet on mobile devices has changed considerably over the past 3 years and we are in no doubt that attitudes will continue to change. Our conversations with researchers suggest that some will welcome mobile accessibility and use it immediately, others will use it when needed and some will not use it at all. But if mobile use increases as our statistics suggest, by making the site mobile friendly the Copac service is effectively future proofed and ready for the increased uptake.

What now for mobile at Mimas?

With the new Copac now launched, the Mimas Marketing Team are working closely with the Copac service to monitor mobile usage using a combination of statistics gathered from Google Analytics and feedback from users. But it isn't just Copac that is seeing an increase in mobile usage. The number of users accessing Mimas services by mobile devices increases daily, and as a result, more of Mimas services and projects will be exploring and using the lessons learnt from this project to implement mobile friendly designs.