Renewed connections and new interests

Evaluation of the iPad Essentials Course for older adults

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The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) iPad Essentials Course was designed to equip adults with the skills to utilise new technologies to maintain independence and reduce social isolation. From March 2012 until October 2013 the BSL Social Inclusion Program delivered nine iPad Essentials courses to 130 Community Care clients and older adults from the wider Frankston and Mornington Peninsula community. The course was funded by the Victorian Government's Skills Victoria program and was delivered in Frankston and Rosebud. Regular facilitated 'iCoffee–iChat' sessions for BSL clients were also offered at local venues. These provided an opportunity to share social time and get assistance with any iPad issues.

There were two stages in the evaluation of the iPad Essentials Course:

1. A telephone survey designed to gather information from participants to support potential program development.[1]
2. Individual interviews with participants to explore the impact of using an iPad on their day-to-day lives and emotional wellbeing.

The findings and analysis of the interviews are the subject of this report.

Key findings

Impacts and life changes

- The majority of participants interviewed reported that using an iPad had had a positive impact on their life, with more than half describing quite significant changes.

- iPad use enabled most participants to increase communication with family and friends, to rediscover past interests and to explore new ones,

and to strengthen and expand their community activities.

- For some the iPad provided a means to maintain or develop independent living activities and for others it enhanced their understanding and management of serious health conditions and issues.

- Limited skill acquisition related to health or personal circumstances, or a lack of interest and unmet expectations, resulted in minimal impact of the course for a small number of participants.

Use of iPad features and functions

- The most common purposes reported were communicating with family and friends, finding information (using web browsers) and enjoying entertainment such as games and YouTube.

- Most participants reported using their iPads daily.

- Very few participants reported using their iPad for online shopping or banking.

Outcomes – enablers and barriers

People were more likely to benefit from the training if:

- they were motivated by seeing a purpose for the iPad

- they were relatively confident and self-reliant

- they had access to additional coaching or technical support during and after the training

- they had previous computer experience.

They were less likely to benefit if:

- they had health issues, a physical disability or other limitations

- they had limited or no options for additional coaching or technical support during and after the training.

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[1] The findings of the telephone survey, conducted by students on placement, are contained in an unpublished report.

Strategies and opportunities for program development

- Prior to and during training, develop a better understanding of participants' ongoing training and support needs to strengthen skills and encourage continued iPad use.

- Continue to offer 'iCoffee–iChat' sessions and one-to-one assistance as funding and staffing allow.

- Increase the use of trained peer volunteers by recruiting through the BSL volunteer network and other seniors' organisations.

- Develop special interest short courses or workshops to appeal to a wider audience and to allow access to new funding sources.

Background

Information technology provides older adults with opportunities to engage in activities that contribute to wellbeing, are important to them and add meaning and value to their lives. This may include communicating with family, friends and the wider community; accessing information about services, hobbies and areas of interest; accessing entertainment; and maintaining their independence by shopping and banking online. Research conducted in an aged care setting in the United Kingdom identified a number of advantages of using an iPad, including improving quality of life through increased interaction with family members and friends, increasing intergenerational communication, and engaging with interests and hobbies (Upton et al. 2011).

Tablet devices such as the iPad have created new and easier ways for adults to participate in these types of activities as many of the barriers which inhibited computer use by older Australians either no longer exist or have been greatly diminished. Among the biggest deterrents to older adults using information technology were the complexity of the computer hardware, operating systems and user interface (Haukka 2011). In contrast, tablets are attractive, simple, user-friendly and portable. The iPad also has a number of accessibility features built into the operating software, including increasing the font size, making video phone calls using Skype, VoiceOver which provides a spoken description of web page content, Siri which allows the user to dictate messages and emails, and Assistive Touch which allows people with motor disabilities to create their own custom gestures for using the iPad. Small trials conducted in Australia and overseas with older adults to determine the suitability of tablets for enhancing social connectedness have

indicated that they are considered 'easy to use' and enable most participants to navigate the basic features within a very short time (IBES 2012; Werner, Werner & Oberzaucher 2012). The wide range of applications available, such as email, internet browsing, online newspapers, radio access, meditation tools, puzzles and games, also makes using tablet devices a more appealing prospect than the traditional computer.

Some issues for older adults using the iPad have been identified, including ergonomic issues (weight, the angle of holding the device) and the complexity of the interface relative to physical and cognitive conditions. However, practical solutions—for example, using small pillows or beanbags as iPad 'stands' and providing training, assistance and encouragement according to each person's needs—can overcome these challenges (Upton et al. 2011). Flexible, needs-based training to use an iPad can provide older adults with a more satisfying learning experience and a greater likelihood of achieving success.

Research methodology

This evaluation of the iPad Essentials Training Program reviews the delivery of the program from March 2012 to October 2013. A program logic model provided the evaluation framework and qualitative data collection methods were used. Fifteen iPad Essentials Course participants were recruited with the assistance of the BSL Social Inclusion Program staff to be part of the evaluation. Participants were offered the choice of a face-to-face interview in their home or a telephone interview. An interview was also conducted with the iPad Essentials Program Coordinator.

Findings

Using the iPad functions and features

The participants in this study reported using their iPads for a wide variety of purposes, especially:

- using email to communicate with family, friends, service providers and BSL case workers, including sending and receiving photographs

- searching the World Wide Web to find recipes, craft and hobby ideas and materials, travel directions, event information and health information; for banking and grocery shopping; to reconnect with colleagues and friends; to re-engage with past interests; to watch YouTube videos and to source information for purchasing household items.

Other activities reported were:

- using Skype or FaceTime for video communication with family and friends

- using the camera function to take photographs

- signing online petitions

- using Facebook to keep up with family or joining Facebook groups for particular areas of interest

- downloading Apps for entertainment, including online radio, newspapers, jigsaw puzzles, crosswords, sudoku and card games.

The most common purposes reported were communicating with family and friends and using Safari for finding information and for entertainment such as games and YouTube, with most participants using their iPads daily. Very few participants were using their iPad for banking or shopping, partly because most were concerned about security and privacy, lacked the confidence and skills, or had simple banking and shopping needs that would not be assisted by online technology. Moreover, their current banking and shopping arrangements suited them because they meant 'getting out of the house' and provided important opportunities for social interaction. Some acknowledged the value of banking and shopping on line for others who 'aren't really active', but said it was not for them—'Why change something that's working?' was a common response.

Impacts and life changes

The participants in this study were asked to think about what had changed for them as a result of doing the iPad Essentials Course. Most reported that using an iPad created some change in their lives. The change was more significant for some than for others:

> It's amazing how much, until I actually sit down and think about it, or write about it, I don't realise how much.

> My life! … because of my health problems, it's giving me a new world opened up for me.

> [Coping with] the transition to independent living ... I can honestly say the iPad was my saviour ...

> I feel like I have my life back again.

For the remaining participants the impact was more limited, due either to limited skill acquisition related to health or personal circumstances, or a lack of interest and unmet expectations:

> I have days when my [illness] plays havoc … it takes a long time to stick in my brain.

> It's not the learning, it's the remembering.

> I think I'm too old and it's just a little bit beyond me … I don't think it has much to offer me.

> I don't think I learnt much, it was too technical. I expected to learn from day one … they said I'd be oohing and aahing, but I didn't see any of that.

The participants shared many personal characteristics, such as chronic medical conditions and mobility issues, small social networks, and families who do not live locally. The ways they experienced change, however, were often quite different and have been grouped under the following themes:

- connectedness to family and friends

- social and community engagement

- learning and exploring interests

- health and emotional wellbeing

- independence and re-ablement.

Connectedness to family and friends

Nearly all participants in this study reported an increase in communication with family and friends as a result of using the iPad, through email, using Skype or FaceTime or through Facebook. Several reported that they exchange family photos in this way which increased their sense of connectedness, particularly with younger family members such as grandchildren and nephews and nieces. One participant said that previously 'I had no photos of my grandchildren ... now I've got a lot'. Another reconnected with family who lived some distance away and re-established relationships which had been weakened due to her continuing health issues: '[Being able to] contact my family. It's just amazing.'

While Skype was important for participants whose face-to-face contact with family was limited, due to either distance or mobility issues which restricted travel, some were also using Facebook to make new friends, both locally and overseas.

Social and community engagement

Being able to communicate easily through email and to search the web for information enabled a number of the participants in this study to become more involved with their existing social networks and community groups, clubs and activities, as well as joining new ones. This included keeping up with their sporting club results, meeting dates and minutes of meetings. One participant reported that he could now carry out his official role at his club more efficiently. For two participants, attending the course gave them a chance to volunteer as

assistants helping other participants in the iPad course and for one this led to training as an iPad trainer.

Making new friends was not on everyone's agenda. One participant observed that she felt she had enough and 'really couldn't fit any more'. For some, however, new friendships came as an unexpected bonus. One man said that while initially he 'wasn't looking for friends' he had 'made a new friend' through assisting another participant, whom he met at the 'iCoffee–iChat' sessions, to solve issues with pre-paid internet access. The recipient of the assistance also talked about this new friendship and its positive impact on her life.

Others have used the iPad to re-engage with past colleagues and interests. One participant, who had been a professional sportsman but whose degenerative neurological disorder had forced him to give up his career, told how he had been using his iPad to reconnect with his former colleagues after searching for them using Safari and then making email contact. Another participant was re-engaging in her passion for community activism, joining Facebook pages and signing petitions for animal rescue and animal rights.

Learning and exploring interests

Several participants in this study reported that using the iPad to explore their existing interests had increased their enjoyment of these activities. Some were finding patterns for craft activities and trying new methods and materials. Another was excited about using Google Search to enhance her book club participation. When the group was reading a book set in Paris and 'mentioning different artists ... I looked them up and found their pictures'.

One participant already enjoyed regular activities with a group of longstanding friends, and organised many of their activities. These activities were extended through having access to a wider range of event information. Instead of staying close to home, the group used Google Maps to explore activities further afield and in unfamiliar locations, including 'a pop-up garden in the city [and a] worm farm ... so yes, we would never have done that before!'

Health and emotional wellbeing

Using an iPad had a positive effect on study participants' health and emotional wellbeing and was particularly significant for those with chronic health conditions.

Some chronically ill participants were using their iPads to research up-to-date information about their illness, new treatments, and their medications. Being better informed about their illness, its progress, its impact on their lives and possible management strategies, they felt empowered to 'ask questions about what they're giving me' and to make informed decisions in their interactions with doctors and other medical practitioners.

The benefit of using the iPad for these participants was not limited to access to information about their illness and interactions with medical practitioners. They also observed that physical incapacity and experiences of mental illness and depression had made them increasingly isolated and housebound and 'slowly becoming a hermit again and I don't want that'. All believed that attending the iPad classes, the 'iCoffee–iChat' sessions and connecting with others through the internet had had a positive impact on their emotional wellbeing. Some were using their iPad to share personal experiences communicate with others with the same health conditions to.

One participant indicated that the reality of what the iPad offered had exceeded his expectations. Access to information gave him a different and more hopeful outlook on his life and his illness as well as improving his emotional and mental health.

Two participants now used email to contact their BSL case manager, which gave them confidence that if they needed help it was not far away. One participant preferred email to telephone contact because it was more private than leaving a message with others if their case manager was unavailable: 'I know at some stage she is going to read her emails' and 'I can be specific and say, this has happened or I need this or can you help me find out about this'.

Using an iPad for entertainment and games also had health benefits for many participants. As well as keeping their brains active, it often provided a distraction when more serious physical and mental health issues threatened to overwhelm, sometimes being 'the balance in [not] tipping me over the edge because I've got something to do'.

Independence and re-ablement

iPads were playing an important role in maintaining independence and as a tool for re-ablement for several participants in this study. When people face obstacles to mundane activities taken for granted by people who are mobile and in good health, their independence and self-respect are often undermined. For people who are incapacitated, using an iPad can restore their dignity in many ways, such as 'amusing myself [in respite care], not just sitting round being bored, waiting for others to amuse me', being able to buy Christmas and birthday gifts for family members online, or ordering groceries on line without having to 'rely on everybody else

running around after me and I can do it myself'. As well as experiencing practical benefits and a personal sense of self-sufficiency and achievement, some participants gained satisfaction from lessening the burden or obligation for someone else.

For some younger participants, digital connection had very significant ramifications, especially following traumatic or unexpected life events. By using an iPad, they could take back control of important aspects of their lives. Learning how to use online banking to pay bills and manage finances to 'take that back [from Centrelink] and do it myself', searching for healthy food information and recipes to add value to other BSL services received, transitioning to independent living, or investigating opportunities for online study to build on existing qualifications with a goal of employment were facilitated for various participants in the iPad Essentials Course.

Outcomes

It is clear that using the iPad had a beneficial impact on many of the iPad Essentials course participants in this study and that most have acquired the skills and confidence to use the iPad in ways that benefit their lives.

There were, however, a small number who reported at the time of their interview that they were still not able to use many of the basic features, send emails, use online banking or shopping, or search topics or places of interest with any confidence or in an effective way. This included not knowing how to open and close web pages, being able to initiate and answer Skype calls but not understanding the need to hang up when finished, and not knowing how to respond to emails once read.

Several factors influenced these different learning outcomes. In order to increase the likelihood of better learning outcomes for future participants, it is useful to look at the enablers and barriers to skill acquisition and continuing iPad use. Why were some participants in this study able to use their iPads effectively after attending only one iPad Essentials course while others struggle to gain the basic skills after attending multiple courses?

Enablers to skill acquisition and iPad use
- **Personal motivation to participate and learn**, such as the need for information, hobby interests or communication needs. Adults are more likely to experience successful learning outcomes when the training content and tasks are meaningful to their lives. Nearly all the participants in this study enrolled with a clear purpose, regardless of their

iPad use proficiency at the completion of the course. Only two participated because of being urged by others rather than having a personal motivation. Of these two, one became an enthusiastic learner and iPad user once he saw the benefits to his life, while the other no longer used his iPad because it was 'beyond me' and had 'nothing to offer me'.

- **Access to support outside the formal course structure.** Almost two-thirds of participants in this study had support from family members living with them or readily available, or from their social networks, or were competent independent users. Some participants sought additional coaching or technical support through organised activities such as the BSL Social Inclusion Program, 'iCoffee–iChat' sessions or one-to-one training. A recent Australian study found that 72% of internet users aged over 60 sought assistance with training and technical issues from family and close friends (Greenwood & Di Marzio 2013).

- **Previous computer experience.** Research has shown a clear link between education and workforce experience and the ease with which older adults acquire new ICT skills (Derrick et al. 2008). Five of the participants in this study had previously used a computer for work, study or personal reasons and were able to transition easily to the iPad without '... all the buttons and everything, it's just swiping and [is] so much easier'.

- **Coping well with learning in a group setting.** While nearly all participants in this study were happy to attend group sessions and enjoyed the social dimension, just over half indicated that their preferred method for learning to use the iPad would be one-to-one training. Participants who were more confident in taking risks with their iPad, who were able to solve problems by themselves or 'help each other so we could keep up' and who reported previous good experiences of being a learner fared better in the group setting than some others.

Barriers to skill acquisition and iPad use
- **Lack of access to support outside the formal course structure.** Six of the fifteen participants in this study had no access to informal coaching or technical support. Of the small group who were experiencing real difficulty with using their iPads, all except one lived alone and were without readily available support or encouragement from family or social networks. Three participants had been given

iPads by family members, already set up with Apple ID, downloaded Apps and associated passwords. They appreciated the generous gesture but were frustrated because 'Then they go and I've forgotten' and they were left without any assistance to continue to use their iPad and manage its settings and technical aspects. Some were unable to remember passwords created for Apps and had 'given up trying to find Apps, because I can't'. While there were some organised options for additional coaching outside class time, some participants said that the cost of accessing the one-to-one assistance and the 'iCoffee–iChat' sessions might be a barrier if they did not have adequate financial resources.

- **Illness or physical disability or limitation.** The majority of the participants in this study had some degree of mobility, frailty, vision, literacy, mental health or chronic health limitation, with some experiencing multiple issues. While these conditions did not present barriers for some participants, they did have a negative impact on the extent of learning, information retention and class attendance for others.

- **Previous learning experiences.** Low self-confidence and feeling 'really dumb because … I just couldn't get it' in previous learning experiences often engender a fear of failure and apprehension about learning new skills and in turn impacts on learning and retaining information. While some participants commented on this, they also went on to say that the positive and friendly class environment meant that this was not an issue in the iPad Essentials Course.

- **Difficulty coping in a group learning situation.** Some participants reported that they had difficulty learning in the group setting because of the mixed skill levels and other participants who were 'dominating' the trainer's and assistants' time which meant they were unable to get help. Participants who lacked confidence as learners, had physical or cognitive issues or were less vocal in requesting help were more likely to struggle in this setting.

Strategies and opportunities for program development

The iPad Essentials course was originally funded by Skills Victoria as an accredited training course. In 2014 new eligibility requirements meant this financial support was no longer available. Course delivery was suspended while new funding was sought. Opportunities may exist to access other funding

sources by developing a new range of courses and delivery styles.

Development of special interest courses

A range of single-topic courses could be designed for and targeted at specific audiences on a user-pays basis. These could be offered as short courses, or as interactive workshops—for example, an interactive 'iPad Wow' workshop to showcase selected functions and features of the iPad such as online banking and shopping, Skype, using the camera, creating albums and sending photos, Apps for an Active Brain, or using the iPad to manage Consumer Directed Care packages.

Offering special interest training might also expand the range of funding opportunities as submissions could be linked to specific areas such as health promotion, dementia or financial inclusion, rather than to general education funding from government or community education bodies such as Skills Victoria or Adult, Community and Further Education (ACFE), which is often conditional on formal achievement of accredited competencies. It might also provide new opportunities for partnering with other agencies such as neighbourhood houses, men's sheds or community service providers.

Assessment of skill acquisition and available support networks

The iPad Essentials training was offered as an accredited course and participants were required to complete homework and assessment tasks. These tasks were often designed to meet accreditation and funding requirements rather than to build competence in the skills most valued by participants. Regardless of the source of funding and its conditions, it is important that participant skill levels and available support networks be assessed prior to and monitored during training. This would provide a better understanding of any additional coaching or technical assistance needed for clients to strengthen their skills and continue productive iPad use.

Options for ongoing coaching and support

The availability of ongoing coaching and support plays an important role in participant outcomes (Simons 2012). 'iCoffee–iChat' sessions and one-to-one assistance should be continued and developed as funding allows. Consideration could be given to increasing the use of volunteers for both group and one-to-one support, recruiting through the wider BSL volunteer network. This would require careful selection, and an assessment of each volunteer's technical skills and understanding of adult learning principles, to ensure a successful outcome for both the

learner and the volunteer; and some training for volunteers might be required.

Conclusion

The iPad Essentials course has provided a significant number of BSL Community Care clients and members of the wider community with an opportunity to develop skills and confidence in using an iPad.

Apart from one person, all the participants, including those who were still struggling with the technology, expressed the desire to 'learn more' and to be able to use their iPad to achieve their own goals. That so many participants persevered and wished to continue learning using the iPad despite the challenges, and experienced such pleasure in the new avenues that the iPad opened up to them, is an indication of the enormous potential of what new technologies can offer older adults and the capacity of older adults to successfully engage with them.

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Acknowledgements

Further information

For further information about this evaluation or the findings from the telephone survey please contact Bonnie Simons, Senior Research Officer, Research and Policy Centre, bsimons@bsl.org.au.

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