

Pitfalls

Most students need some prior training in using the PDAs, though some have experience and may own one. Not all PDAs are weatherproof and so need to be used in a weatherproof case (a weather proof PDA costs from £1000 upwards). Ortlieb rubber map cases were used for this purpose and the students were instructed on how to operate the PDA & stylus inside the case, but they can be prone to steam up. Bright sunshine directly on the screen makes it difficult to read and needs to be shaded. Losing stylus pen is problematic – this was prevented by fixing the stylus to the case with 30cm of fishing line. If the stylus is lost, the PDA can be operated with a pencil or other pointed object, being careful not to scratch the screen. Battery failure can also occur, although this depends on temperature and age of battery. On a full charge they easily last 4-6 hours (enough for a field day), but be aware that they can be switched on accidentally when in transit.

Evidence of effectiveness

Student Positive Comments: Fairly quick to use; the data are straight onto a spreadsheet ready for analysing; quicker and less chance of collecting incorrect data; less paper to be carried, therefore less lost; when back home the data doesn't have to be put into excel because it's already been done in the field; no wet pieces of paper; will be easy to transfer to PC, legible results; don't need to write much; saved lots of paper flapping about in the wind; the data were recorded in an easy access format; the PDA doing my calculations and not having to write when hands very cold; quick and easy data input and calculation; allowed better layout of data than in notebook; small, easy to use, works in all weather.

Student Negative Comments: The weather was bad so it was a little fiddly to use in the waterproof case; low battery and working in the rain/snow made it hard to view screen; can't see the screen very well in sunlight; it not being waterproof; only when it snowed, protecting PDA in waterproof bag - hard to see screen and awkward to hold PDA in bag; difficult to read in sunlight and under waterproof cover when raining.

Student Suggestions: Study with a PDA before using in the field, to get used to it, and draw up own prepared worksheet; use them on all fieldtrips; quick and easy to use; let there be more PDAs available for everyone; provide bigger plastic bag for use in wet weather; waterproof case instead of big bag; waterproof case that fits the PDA.

Advice to others

PDAs could be used to provide students with alternative 'audio' instructions for tasks they are asked to complete in the field. A PDA fitted with a GPS receiver could be used for navigation to/from field sites using AA Navigator maps & software for UK (£80).

References

- Alexander, B. 2004. Going nomadic: mobile learning in higher education. *Educuse Review* 39, 28-35.
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