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Mobile Learning in the UK today: Successes, Failures, Future

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MOBILE LEARNING IN THE UK TODAY:
SUCCESESS, FAILURES, FUTURE

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, mobile learning has taken an exponential rise in both the scholarly and practitioner community in the United Kingdom (UK). This rise has stemmed from the development of new mobile technologies with unique affordances that offers opportunities to extend pedagogical boundaries. This short paper provides experts perceptions on the mobile learning movement across the UK. The paper beings with a look back in recent history from the first mLearn conference in Birmingham in 2002, then the second part of the paper offers a brief look into the future of mobile learning.

Keywords: Mobile learning, mlearning, m-learning, disruptive, Information, Communication, Technologies, ICT, Personal Data Assistants, PDA, mLearn.

LOOKING BACKWARDS BRIEFLY:
Mobıle Learnıng in Hıgher Educatıon

The impact of popular mobile technologies is changing the nature of communication and content delivery in many industries and countries, often dramatically. In education this has led to the idea of mobile learning, dating back

to the EU's flagship MOBIlearn and m-learning projects starting in 2002, followed over the succeeding decade by hundreds of pilots and projects in schools, colleges, universities and communities in many different parts of the world.

This idea and indeed much of the research in using mobiles for learning, mobile learning or m-learning as it became known, is about ten years old.

The first mLearn conference, held in Birmingham in 2002 was a useful and defining landmark.

In the intervening decade, mobile learning research projects, driven by exploration of educational theory and exploitation of each new technology, have shown how mobile technologies can motivate engage and learners, often the most disengaged, can challenge existing educational thinking, can extend the reach of learning out to individuals and communities that were previously too difficult or expensive to reach and can enrich and enhance the experience of learning.

Throughout this preceding decade the projects revolved however around technology, around implementations and deployment that were all relatively expensive, fragile, formal, small-scale, short-term, institutional and subsidised, taking place in a benign albeit deceptive and deteriorating, global economic climate.

These technologies are increasingly advanced and engaging but never became fully integrated in higher education, despite the massive potential. Unlike other educational Information Communication Technologies (ICT)s, for example PCs or TVs, they are personal, cheap and found at the bottom-of-the-pyramid in socio-economic terms. The personalisation and the relatively low cost of the devices are two reasons for asserting that mobile technologies can have a massive educational potential.

The projects grew out of the ideas and lexicon of innovation. For example, phrases like early adopters, critical mass and change agents, that were popular at the time; they were often funded as developmental projects, intended to become established within institutions by a process of downward and outward diffusion and thus intended to become embedded and mainstreamed.

This may or may not have happened but generally, the finances and culture were against them. The finances were against them because the innovation just looked like an extra cost for an un-quantified benefit and the culture was against them because innovators were driven by very different ideals and objectives when compared to mainstream lecturers, their managers and their quality assurance regimes.

The evidence was not always convincing or apparent but the extra costs were. Therefore, most mobile learning projects from this era never got beyond a pilot phase and researchers moved on from one innovation to the next innovation, in a parallel universe of research funding.

It might be the case in the UK that the agencies funding and supporting mobile learning innovation, deployment, evaluation and dissemination, mainly Becta, JISC and perhaps the HEA Subject Centres never had the resources, priorities, expertise or confidence to create enough projects across their respective sectors to achieve a critical mass and sustaining community.

It was also the case that to some extent the funding agencies moved on from the mind-set of local discrete innovation, preferring to addressing change at a more systemic and institutional level, leaving mobile learning in limbo.

These projects were usually funded across a year or two, with a handful of staff, the enthusiasts and visionaries, alongside rather than inside the core assessed curriculum, and all these features militated against an embedded sustainable future. Hardware, that is mobiles or earlier Personal Data Assistants (PDAs), was usually built into the budget.

It guaranteed a uniform and consistent platform and experience, removed a confounding variable and reduced technical problems. It also limited the size of any sample and produced no exit strategy. It thus had no sustainability in terms of finance or culture.

Latterly, the mobile-specific initiatives merged with educational exploration of other popular digital technologies such as podcasts, micro-blogging and social networks but by this time the national funding environment both for innovation and for subsequent embedding had become distinctly bleak.

Looking back, one brief exception to this account might be the Learning and Skills Network (LSN)'s MoLeNET programme, putting mobile learning hardware and infrastructure into the further education sector from 2007 to 2010.

MoLeNET stands for Mobile Learning Network. It is the UK's and possibly the world's largest and most diverse implementation of mobile learning boasting approximately 40,000 learners and more than 7,000 staff across further education colleges, specialist colleges and schools.

This implementation grew out of the early EU flagship project, m-learning, and various smaller successor projects that built capacity and credibility within LSDA and its funders and meant that LSN (the successor agency to LSDA) could grasp the opportunity of LSC funding when it became available.

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This was not however really a direct consequence of evidence and evaluation, more of a certain local climate and specific relationships. By the same token, the programme, funded on a year-by-year basis for three years to approximately £14m, was not explicitly tasked with producing further evidence nor did it prioritise external evaluation. (In fact the dispersed and heterogeneous nature of the projects compounded any difficulties with evaluation as did the programmes rather generalised objectives.)

This perhaps tells us that pilot projects and their outputs and evidence have not always played the kind of primary role that researchers would imagine, and that sometimes change takes place in other ways. The restrictions imposed on the funding by the Learning Skills Council (LSC) meant it was not only short-term and un-predictable but also intended only for capital hardware, neither for devices that were essentially disposable nor for their connectivity.

This may seem a minor point but illustrates how the procedures of institutional procurement and support have trouble as their focus moves from large stable desktop devices to many small personal ones and is one more small hurdle to embedding mobile learning within the established practices of electronic learning (e-learning).

The early mobile learning projects also grew out of the e-learning of the time, out of the e-learning community, its aspirations and objectives, and seemed to offer learning anywhere, anytime. Indeed many early projects attempted to port e-learning systems, for example Virtual Learning Environments (VLE)s, from desktop computers onto mobile phones, whilst others more adventurously tried to incorporate the affordances of mobile phones, for example image-capture or location-awareness, into an e-learning ethos.

They also borrowed extensively from the e-learning pedagogy of the time, specifically the social constructivism expressed in Diana Laurillard's Conversational Framework, stretching what was a conceptualisation of static formal learning further into the rapidly evolving, technically-mediated, mobile informal. All of these projects did however also work within the confines of the existing institutions and their established curricular, either enriching or enhancing them or extending their reach to people and communities otherwise too difficult or costly to reach.

In both of these general categories, that of enriching and enhancing education and that of extending its reach, some mobile learning projects served aspects of the inclusion agenda. There were significant advances in supporting students with physical disability, for example hearing or mobility problems, and with cognitive problems, such as dyslexia, and there were projects targeting non-traditional students.

Much of the work in assistivity, as it was known, in moving from attempting to solve specific problems with specific technical solutions to adopting the rhetoric of inclusive design, design for all, a sensible strategy as mobile devices became ubiquitous and pervasive. In the higher education sector, TechDis, a Jount Information Systems Committee (JISC) service, were very energetic in evaluating and disseminating such technologies for assistivity. Note that assistivity is now called assistive technologies. The end result does however seem be to a large-scale pedagogic research movement that somehow seemed to have difficulty becoming embedding inside the institutions and thereby achieving its full potential, a set of interesting projects and results but not ones that spoke to the higher education sector as a whole.

LOOKING FORWARD BRIEFLY:
The Demographics and Social Trends of Mobile Technology

In the coming decade, from roughly the present onwards, the technology of mobiles has become popular, personal, robust, cheap and social.

The technology has become democratic or rather demotic in nature as society itself became mobile and connected. It became increasingly difficult to imagine everyday life before or without mobile technology as functionality and capability increased, as a generation of young people matured and as network take-up, competition and coverage increased to near saturation.

This leads to an emergent new world, with its communities, expectations and behaviour.

In this emergent new world, connected universal mobile devices, the portal onto web2.0 services, change the nature of learning and knowing; everyone with a smartphone can generate, store, share, discuss and consume images, ideas, information and opinions, they can access the cloud, and the services it provides, and they can access each other; they can pursue, sustain or invent interests specific to them, their location

This sounds like education by another name, but an education without the gatekeepers, barriers and constraints of most schools, colleges and universities, and without the support, standards, structure, stability and incentives of these established institutions.

The challenge to education systems is of course the shift or discrepancy in control, authority and agency represented not by the technologies themselves but by the social changes around them. This is perhaps at the heart of notions that mobile learning is disruptive, not just a nuisance, but profoundly disruptive.

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