

# Chapter 1

## Sustaining Mobile Learning and its Institutions

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Mobile learning can be characterised as a specific project within the education system. This paper explores the sustainability of mobile learning in the wider context of the sustainability of that system. Mobile devices are near-universal and their impact brings near-universal connectedness to people, data, content, and media. There are consequently subtle but pervasive transformations of jobs, work, and the economy, of sense of time, space and place, knowing and learning, and of community and identity, which call the sustainability of the education system, and consequently of the mobile learning project, into question.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

There is an ethical context to learning using mobile devices, that is, a context in which we connect with learners, composed of challenges such as sustainability, scalability (or transferability), equity, inclusion, opportunity and embedding. This ethical context grows out of concerns for the role of learning with mobile devices in addressing deprivation and disadvantage and for informing the relevant policy environment. The sustainability

of this form of learning is, however, intimately linked to definitions and divisions between formal and informal learning (and work-based learning) and thus, in the case of formal learning, to the sustainability, credibility and viability of educational institutions and by inference the education system.

There is a link between the proposition that the impact of widespread mobility and connectness will render the education system *broken* or at least *badly dented* and the sustainability of learning with mobile devices, at least as currently conceptualised and enacted in formal settings

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within that education system. This paper explores that position.

The London Mobile Learning Group (for example, in Pachler, 2009) sees learning using mobile devices governed by a triangular relationship between three components, cultural practices (the routines of users / learners in their everyday lives), socio-cultural structures (and technological) structures that govern their being in the world) and the agency of media users / learners (their capacity to act on the world). The interrelationship of these components is an ecology, a durable and purposive dynamic system of interacting components, and as such there are overtones or questions of sustainability, manifest in questions like, “What *sustainable* relationship is there between user-generated content, user-generated contexts and learning?”, “How can educational institutions *sustainably* cope with the more informal communicative approaches to digital interactions that new generations of learners possess?”, “Does the notion of learner-generated cultural resources represent a *sustainable* paradigm shift for formal education in which learning is viewed in categories of context and not content?” (adapted from the questions posed at the Alpine Rendezvous and highlighted in for example, Pachler, Bachmair, & Cook, 2010)

This paper asks whether the impact of mobile devices and mobility mean that the education system, especially the institutions of formal learning, need to make tactical, technical changes and reforms (and mobile learning has to date been one of these), and whether sustainable *business-as-usual* is still possible? Or whether these changes suggest that the education system is somehow *broken* and no longer fit-for-purpose?

The personal, cultural and social aspects of these implications of mobile devices on the education system hinge on the essential difference between desktop technologies and mobile technologies, a difference that means we can ignore the former but not the latter. Interacting with a desktop computer takes place in a bubble,

in dedicated times and places where the learner has their back to the rest of world for a substantial and probably planned episode. Interacting with a mobile is different and woven into all the times and places of learners’ lives. Mobile devices have created “simultaneity of place”: a physical space and a virtual space of conversational interactions through the creation and juxtaposition of a mobile social space. This affects people’s sense of time, space, place and location, their affiliations and loyalties to groups and communities, the ways in which they relate to other individuals and to groups, their sense of their identity, and their ethics, that is their sense of what is right, what is acceptable and what is appropriate.

This paper argues that desktop technologies can be ignored but not mobile technologies; desktop technologies operate in their own small world, mobile technologies operate in *the* world. This of course makes an artificial distinction between desktop and mobile technologies. It raises the possibility that some technologies, for example netbooks or laptops, fall between these two extremes. The important issue is the affordances of these apparently intermediary technologies. Are they treated like mobiles or treated like desktops, by whom, in what situations, on which occasions and in what ways?

Mobile devices demolish the need to tie particular activities to particular places or particular times. They reconfigure relationships between public and private spaces, and the ways in which these relationships are penetrated by virtual spaces. Virtual communities and discussions were previously mediated by static networked PCs in dedicated times, places and spaces. Now, mobiles propel these communities and discussions into physical public and private spaces, forcing changes and adjustments to all three as we learn to manage a more fluid environment.

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