

Chapter 16

The Commuter's Learning Journey: Field Observations Informing Mobile Learning Initiatives

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ABSTRACT

This chapter covers a five-year research project using field observations to document mobile use in different contexts. The critical incident technique is used to interrogate the observation notes, discussions, interviews and reflections. The value of the field observations is important for planning mobile learning initiatives. The observed adults' Personal Learning Environments (PLEs) are interrogated for evidence of learning in the absence of formal assessments in either a formative or summative manner. The time frame and chapter will reveal patterns and behavioral changes which could inform future mobile learning and adoption of mobile technology for education.

INTRODUCTION

The rise of mobile learning while commuting was recorded by field observers from 2011 – 2016. Be it planes, trains, automobiles or the waiting and traveling between point A and B, mobile devices have surpassed the newspaper or book as the engagement tool. Partly because mobile devices have become the instrument by which travelers and commuters consume, produce, connect, resource or interact with their personal contacts, material, news or entertainment content. Echoing Ahmad, 2012; Attewell and Savill-Smith, 2004, Pegrum, 2014, Sharples, M., Arnedillo-Sánchez, I., Milrad, M., & Vavoula, 2009; Udell, 2012), the principle investigator (PI) operates from the possibility that learning is everywhere. Learning experiences should and do take place outside of classrooms and can be for enjoyment and personal growth without the means or a need for formal assessment (Jacott, 2009; Kukulska-Hulme, 2005; Traxler, 2009). Similarly, Naismith (2005) indicates that “[k]nowledge is information in context

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and since mobile devices enable the delivery of context specific information they are well placed to enable learning and the construction of knowledge” (Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula, & Sharples, pp.7).

While Traxler wrote in 2005 that mobile learning is difficult to define, he did suggest that it is a wholly new and distinct educational format, needing to set its own standards and expectations. Naismith et al., (2005) defined mobile learning as supporting intentional and incidental learning episodes. And in this way, learning is definitely not limited to school classrooms as it takes place outside of school, places of work, and while on vacation, at home or while commuting. Not just reading to one’s child, or, a child reading on a mobile device, but also, fact checking during social occasions, dinner conversations, and meetings or engaging via Social Network Systems (SNS) while watching television or while commuting. With current mobile devices and applications (apps), individuals and groups are able to get access to the knowledge that they need and want on topics that they are interested in, on the spur of the moment. Learning can occur even if you are no longer a student in a traditional sense of the word, because you can learn for pleasure, work, or personal betterment. As learning can happen at any time of the day, intentional field observers were needed to check the hypothesis that learning occurs with mobile devices while on the go.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

The observation area was within the USA, and predominantly within the New York City area in that field observers were located within that metropolitan as either permanent dwellers or purposeful sojourners. In this case, the majority of the field observers were temporary residents of the city for the purpose of graduate studies. While a few children were mentioned in observations, the overwhelming majority and main focus were adults as they could be engaged if needed. Only cases where adults were accompanying or engaging children, were the field observations included in the data to be collated and analyzed. The observed adults’ personal learning environments (PLEs) are interrogated for evidence of learning in the absence of formal assessments in either a formative or summative manner. The field observers were diverse and offered rich perspectives informed by their various backgrounds.

The field observation assignment was part of a mobile phone learning preparation course and designed with the intentionality of using observations as part of the pre-work of any proposed mobile learning initiative. Various mobile learning initiatives have been launched because of the hype and ubiquity of mobile devices. There are often times assumptions from general educators as well as instructional and mobile learning designers about users as potential mobile learners with mobile teachers rarely used which is significant as to who predominantly owns the mobile educational process (Traxler, and Kukulska-Hulme, 2005, Traxler, 2009). Various restarts of mobile learning have been described as back to the drawing board because of preemptive assumptions informing designs (Renaissance Innovation Charter HS, 2011, Year Up Providence, 2013; Canadian International School in Japan, 2013). The field assignments were broad and were structured to be open and accessible for students from various backgrounds and levels, as well as to cater to their needs within their fields. No technology requirements were used to determine or exclude any field observer from collecting data. The varied backgrounds or departmental, program and school affiliations of field observers offered their contextual motivations, and provided expertise and perspectives from their departmental, programmatic and scholarly backgrounds, which showcased a rich milieu of lenses.

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