



# Ethical Considerations in Implementing Mobile Learning in the Workplace

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## ABSTRACT

*Workplace based personal and professional development is essential for students in the health, social care and teaching professions. In this era of ubiquitous computing recording and reflecting upon learning and reviewing student progress in the workplace is easily enabled via mobile technologies. Yet researchers and student users in these settings continue to find using personal, mobile technologies a challenge; though now it is much less a technical challenge than one requiring institutional and cultural innovation in permissions and behaviours within these settings. This article describes the outcomes of a recent international workshop conducted with experts in the fields of mobile learning and education on prioritising areas of concern and establishing best practice. In conclusion it presents a framework for consideration by the mobile learning community that can be used to highlight or prioritise ethical considerations before conducting research into the use of mobile devices by students in workplaces and schools. [Article copies are available for purchase from InfoSci-on-Demand.com]*

*Keywords: Consent; Ethical Issues; Ethics; Mobile Learning, PDAs; Privacy*

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## INTRODUCTION

Workplace based personal and professional development is essential for students in the health, social care and teaching professions. All training

programmes for such students involve spending significant amounts of time (weeks or months) on placement in hospital, surgery, practice centre or school as relevant. Pilot studies have shown that mobile technologies such

as handheld computers, mobile phones and PDAs can effectively support this form of professional learning (Wishart et al, 2007; Treadwell, 2005) by being used to capture evidence to assist assessment. However, these involved the use of personal, private devices that can access and store a wealth of information including images and have the potential to attract debate over ethical concerns arising from both research into the use of mobile devices and the process of teaching with them.

Ethical concerns are not new. Early work on concerns over potential misuse of information and communications technologies developed into the field of computer ethics and focused on the special nature of information itself. Over twenty years ago Mason (1986) introduced four ethical concerns specific to the Information Age:

- **privacy:** which information can be withheld and which cannot, under what conditions and with what safeguards;
- **accuracy:** the authenticity, and fidelity of stored information;
- **ownership** - both of the information and the channels through which it is transmitted
- **accessibility:** what information does a person or an organization have a right or a privilege to obtain, under what conditions and with what safeguards?

This led to an emphasis on issues of ownership and accuracy which was

maintained by Anderson and Blackwood (2004) who were the first to publish on the debate on ethics of the use of mobile technologies in education. They focused on college and higher education (HE) with particular reference to legal and privacy issues such as ownership and copyright. However, whilst Anderson's (2005) second paper on privacy issues further develops implications of tracking personal use, neither paper considers the use of mobile phone cameras nor do they address issues associated with the need to capture evidence of learning during a college or HE student's work based learning placement for later assessment.

More ethical questions pertinent to the special nature of mobile learning were presented to the mobile learning research community by Traxler and Bridges (2004). They presented an outline for ethical mobile learning research that highlights three areas: informed consent, confidentiality and differentials in power between researcher and researched associated with age and class. The issue of informed consent was recently the subject of discussion across the UK when the Cityware project at the University of Bath (O'Neill et al, 2006) hit the news under the banner headline, "Bluetooth Big Brother uses mobiles and laptops to track thousands of Britons." It is difficult for researchers asking for consent to be clear about how much participants really understand about the capability of their mobile devices. Traxler and Bridges (ibid) also highlight privacy with reference to

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