

## Chapter 2

# Learning in a Mobile Age, a More and More Mobile Age

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The launch of the International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning is one of several indicators that mobile learning globally is reaching a critical and sustainable momentum and identity. The past nine or ten years have seen a host of pilots and initiatives across sectors and across countries and these have established firstly that mobile learning takes learning to individuals, communities and countries where access to learning was challenging or problematic and secondly that mobile learning enhances, enriches and extends how learning is understood. Environmental factors have meant that this development has been haphazard. The mobile learning community is now faced with broader challenges of scale, durability, equity, embedding and blending in addition to the earlier and more specific challenges of pedagogy and technology, but these developments take place in the context of societies where mobile devices, systems and technologies have a far wider impact than just mobile learning as it is currently conceived. This chapter looks at the definition and evolution of mobile learning as the starting point for a discussion of this wider impact.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

We need to define what we mean by ‘mobile learning’, not merely as a way of establishing a shared understanding but also as a way of explor-

ing the evolution and direction of mobile learning and as a way of identifying the community of practitioners and researchers. In discussing how we define mobile learning we address many wider issues in terms of explaining, understanding and conceptualising it.

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‘Mobile learning’ is certainly not merely the conjunction of ‘mobile’ and ‘learning’; it has always implicitly meant ‘mobile e-learning’ and its history and development have to be understood as both a continuation of ‘conventional’ e-learning and a reaction to this ‘conventional’ e-learning and to its perceived inadequacies and limitations. Over the last ten or so years this ‘conventional’ e-learning has been exemplified technologically by the rise of virtual learning environments (VLEs) and the demise of computer assisted learning (CAL) ‘packages’, and pedagogically by the rise of social constructivist models of learning over the behaviourist ones, by the growth of the learning object approach, by expectations of ever increasing multi-media interactivity and of ever-increasing power, speed, functionality and bandwidth in networked PC platforms.

These are some of the points of departure for mobile learning. They refer back to ‘conventional’ e-learning and perhaps this is the mark of early ‘mobile learning immigrants’ and not the mark of the growing number of ‘mobile learning natives’.

### **Learning in a Mobile Age: A More and More Mobile Age**

We have to recognise that attempts at identifying and defining mobile learning grow out of difference, out of attempts by emergent communities to separate themselves from some older and more established communities and move on from perceived inadequate practices. Interestingly, at the first mLearn conference in the spring of 2002, in Birmingham UK, a key-note speaker predicted that mobile learning would have a separate identity for perhaps five years before blending into general e-learning. This has still yet to happen and mobile learning continues to gain identity and definition rather than lose them. Irrespective of the exact definition, personal mobile and wireless technologies, including handheld computers, personal digital assistants, cameraphones, smartphones, graphing calculators, personal response systems,

games consoles and personal media players, are ubiquitous in most parts of the world and have led to the development of ‘mobile learning’ as a distinctive but ill-defined entity (see for example the reviews by Cobcroft 2006, and Naismith *et al* 2004).

### **Easy Definitions**

Early approaches at defining mobile learning focussed on technology, for example saying it was “any educational provision where the sole or dominant technologies are handheld or palmtop devices” (Traxler, 2005), or on the mobility of the technology, describing mobile learning as, “elearning through mobile computational devices: Palms, Windows CE machines, even your digital cell phone.” (Quinn, 2000). Another view of mobile learning says it involves: “Any sort of learning that happens when the learner

is not at a fixed, predetermined location, or learning that happens when the learner takes advantage of learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies” (O’Malley *et al.*, 2003), whilst Desmond Keegan took a similar position in 2005, saying “I feel that in the definition of *mobile* learning the focus should be on mobility. Mobile learning should be restricted to learning on devices which a lady can carry in her handbag or a gentleman can carry in his pocket. I therefore define mobile learning as ‘the provision of education and training on PDAs/palmtops/handhelds, smartphones and mobile phones.’ One of the characteristics of mobile learning is that it uses devices

- which citizens are used to carrying everywhere with them,
- which they regard as friendly and personal devices,
- which are cheap and easy to use,
- which they use constantly in all walks of life and in a variety of different settings, except education.” (Keegan, 2005:3)

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