

## Chapter 2

# Appropriation of Mobile Cultural Resources for Learning

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### ABSTRACT

*This article proposes appropriation as the key for the recognition of mobile devices—as well as the artefacts accessed through, and produced with them—as cultural resources across different cultural practices of use, in everyday life and formal education. The article analyses the interrelationship of users of mobile devices with the structures, agency and practices of, and in relation to what the authors call the “mobile complex”. Two examples are presented and some curricular options for the assimilation of mobile devices into settings of formal learning are discussed. Also, a typology of appropriation is presented that serves as an explanatory, analytical frame and starting point for a discussion about attendant issues.*

### INTRODUCTION: NEW PHENOMENA REQUIRE NEW CONCEPTS

“It’s fun and the best part was the comments I got from people, my family, my friends, like ‘Oh my god your school has actually given you an N91 phone, how cool is that’”. Taken at face value, this statement made by a university student, who was engaged in ‘off-site’ learning (see the example

later in this article), does not suggest a recognition of the mobile device in question as a resource for learning. There is a hint of a suggestion that smartphones can provide motivational support for some learners. Yet, from our perspective, the above quotation reveals a considerable potential gain for formal education: the student reacts to the smartphone from the perspective of everyday life. She values the mobile device in terms of her social environment: she considers it to be cool. Other possible responses might be to consider it

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to be boring, too expensive or some other category relevant in that context. Therefore, we understand the student's perspective to be framed by her everyday life. This, to us, is self-evident as the prevalent site of cultural practices around the mobile phone is everyday life. And, we see this link to everyday life as a real potential as it opens up a vast number of instances of meaning-making in informal contexts to formal learning. At the same time it poses a challenge for formal education as everyday life is socially structured by entertainment, mass communication, fashion, milieus, marketing, information transfer etc. Unsurprisingly, for the student the N91 is primarily a *cool* lifestyle resource and not a resource for learning. We posit that if educators recognize the learning with and around mobile devices within the context of everyday life, mobile devices could become a meaningful link between learning in formal contexts such as school and universities and learning in the informal context of everyday life.

Traditionally school, college and higher education (we use these terms interchangeably to indicate formal sites of learning and teaching) have been viewed as being quite separate culturally to the 'mobile complex'. By mobile complex we mean the transformation of the world around us, which is increasingly marked by fluidity, provisionality and instability, where responsibilities for meaning-making as well as other risk-taking have been transferred from the state and its institutions to the individual, who has become a consumer of services provided by a global market. We are also witnessing considerable changes in the consumption and production as well as current characteristics of the media landscape, such as participation, distribution, local and global content, ubiquity and multimodality. Against this background, are attempts to confine societally valorized learning into dedicated sites still appropriate and valid? From our cultural perspective, this division is increasingly artificial, even counterproductive. The gap between formal education and the mobile complex, we believe,

can be overarched meaningfully by the process of appropriation. Mobile content and 'mobile activities' represent one possible pillar on which to rest a metaphorical bridge between the two. We know a lot about the appropriation of mobile phones by young learners (see Bachmair, 2007), but is it desirable to open formal education to these forms of appropriation, or is there a danger of them undermining traditional approaches to learning in formal contexts which are, after all, culturally important forms of appropriation and a considerable resource for social success?

### **Appropriation as Key Concept for Mobile Learning**

We see appropriation as a generic term for all processes of the internalization of the pre-given world of cultural products. It also covers learning across the breadth of learning in educational institutions, i.e. in formal contexts, and learning in everyday life, i.e. in informal settings. Learning in informal settings goes hand in hand with media use in everyday life. We see learning and media use as modes of appropriation. The main focus in our discussion of appropriation is on learning with mobile devices. The field of mobile devices is characterized by media convergence and comprises specific structures, agency and practices, which we summarize by the notion of the 'mobile complex'.

The growth in projects on learning with mobile devices internationally, and their seeming success, suggests that the stance of schools worldwide of preferably not allowing pupil-owned mobile phones on the premises, and not considering them as valuable resources for learning, is likely to change sooner rather than later. It might be argued that we are not far away from achieving a critical mass of inexpensive, learner-owned devices that can provide access to learning. This raises the question what curricular functions could be delegated to them. The mobile phone does not fit neatly into the didactic tradition of audiovisual

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