

Chapter 17

Book Review

The Zen of Mobile Learning – Turning the Eye Inward

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Review of 'Researching Mobile Learning: Frameworks, tools and research designs' edited by Giasemi Vavoula, Norbert Pachler and Agnes Kukulska-Hulme (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009)

INTRODUCTION

Mobile learning is a relatively recent research field, with only a decade or two of published research, but one that will become increasingly relevant to the broader themes of technology enhanced learning as a result of increasingly sophisticated and ubiquitous mobile devices. Not, of course, that technology is the only consideration, and many valuable learning applications have been produced with simple technologies, but burgeoning access to mobile platforms can only increase

the opportunities for our research field. As Diana Laurillard points out in the book's foreword, 'it is the peculiarity of digital technologies that they combine several equivalents of old technologies' (p.x) and the combination of technologies in the average mobile device increases all the time. Many of the phones in the hands of our students already support GPS, WiFi and Video over and above the standard expectations of voice, data and still camera. The consequences of this are first of all a huge increase in the potential of these devices for delivering learning applications, but also a corresponding increase in the complexity of evaluating how these devices might actually

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be contributing to learning in a multi media, multi connected world where device and lifestyle are increasingly interwoven.

In the context of this increasingly complex learning space, there are exciting opportunities for the researcher. To meet these opportunities we need to both grow and mature as a research community. An important step in this direction is to increase the number of new researchers working in mobile learning. There have already been encouraging developments in this area, driven partly by specialist research groups such as those in the U.K., Scandinavia and South Africa that are promoting high quality Ph.D. work. Equally importantly, we have to make sure that those researchers are given adequate support in undertaking their work rigorously and effectively. This requires them to be given appropriate insights into suitable theories and methods within which they can frame their studies. In this context, the publication of this book is both timely and important. It provides a broad range of material that covers key theories and methods, and reflects on what we have learned from some past projects.

The book is divided into five parts; The Introduction, which introduces research methods, evaluation and data capture, Frameworks, which covers a range of techniques as applied to different projects, Methods, which covers both generic methods and specific tools such as eye tracking, Research Design which covers some practical issues in designing a research activity, and finally The Way Forward, which builds on the book's content to look ahead to future research directions.

An edited book of this nature is unavoidably structured in a post hoc basis, depending on the submissions that are received and accepted. For this review I have diverged somewhat from the sequence and structure provided by the editors in an attempt to identify the key themes of the volume and distil the main contributions of the authors. I have chosen to approach this as a descriptive review, rather than a critical one, so as to provide a roadmap of its contents for the reader. For me, the

main themes seem to suggest a need to move away from limited positivist research and to consider more broadly the processes and undercurrents of mobile learning as it is experienced by the learner. Hence the title of this review; we need to turn the eye inward to discover how learners interact with mobile learning tools, contexts and long term experiences if we are to really understand their meanings and values. If Zen emphasises experience over theory, then perhaps we should also consider such an approach to our mobile learning explorations if they are to enlighten us.

Tracking and Triangulation: Quantitative and Qualitative Measures

In his introductory chapter 'Research Methods in Mobile and Informal Learning: Some Issues', Norbert Pachler acknowledges the substantial work in informal learning that is referenced in this volume, and makes the case that the affinity between informal and mobile learning means that we have many insights to be gained from research into informal learning. He also states that thus far the tools and methods appropriate for mobile learning research have not been explicitly established. An important issue is the change in locus of control triggered by mobile devices, and the contextual, connected, personalised experiences that they bring. In framing the context of this volume Pachler sets out some of the dichotomies that we face in terms of how we approach research in the complex, multi dimensional space of mobile learning; what we are trying to achieve, how we might achieve it, and to what extent we need to revise and review our traditional views on methodology.

Approaching mobile learning research from a perspective of complexity and context, where simple measures may tell us little, if anything, about the learner's true experiences, means we must look at triangulating our research from multiple perspectives, both quantitative and

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