Welcome to the special African Edition of the International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning! The idea of this special issue was a long time fermenting but its realization is a considerable achievement. It grew out of a belief that there has been a lot of research activity in mobile learning in Africa and that this deserved greater visibility and recognition. In the last five or six years, we have seen a rapid apparent growth of mobile learning activity across Africa but this activity has not always been rigorously documented and reviewed. Sometimes it replicates the experiences and challenges elsewhere; sometimes it responds to specific challenges of local infrastructure or the specifics of local culture; sometimes it represents the localized version of global and corporate training accessing the international knowledge economy; at other times it represents the work of social entrepreneurs, not-for-profits and m4d activists supporting indigenous languages, traditional pedagogy and informal knowledge. All of this has been sadly under-documented and under-reported and we felt it deserved a wider global audience. There was another parallel agenda behind this special edition, namely that recognition, and indeed promotion and funding, for academics and researchers everywhere, including Africa, depends on publication, in particular publication of research papers in recognized peer-reviewed journals. The International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning is devoting this special edition to mobile learning in Africa in order to give an opportunity specifically to African academics.

The original call identified a range of the most pressing themes, including:

1. Theories of mobile learning in Africa and practical experiences of mobile learning in Africa.
2. The characteristics and challenges of infrastructure and culture; cost-effectiveness of mobile learning in Africa.
3. Local interpretations of mobile learning.
4. Supporting indigenous languages and local cultures; the role of traditional pedagogy and informal knowledge.
5. Social media in a mobile environment, Web 2.0 tools for mobile learners in Africa and emerging mobile literacies in an African context.
6. Understanding mobile learning in an African context, the African mobile learning context and the relevance of the African...
experience to other challenging environments and societies.

7. Building a greater understanding of ‘African-ness’ and how this relates to accounts of mobile learning.

Clearly, such a comprehensive and ambitious brief is too much for one journal issue! Nevertheless we do now have a set of papers each in some sense or another about mobile learning in Africa, and it is tempting to make some general inferences and observations. In order to do this we have to tread very carefully between ambitious, tenuous or feeble generalizations (remember George Bush, “Africa is a country...”) and nothing at all, conceding the whole experience is contingent and says nothing. We also run the risk of appearing to learn what we should have known at the outset: that Africa is big; the infrastructure is not always good; governance, administration and policy may be weak; the climate can be harsh; there is incredible linguistic and cultural diversity, some of it fragile and endangered, and so on. So we must be cautious. The issue as a whole also begs or addresses questions about the nature of African-ness being implied - is it sparsity, rurality and distance? Is it poverty and deprivation? Is it weakness in infrastructure, capacity and organization? Is it national, cultural and linguistic diversity? Readers must decide, otherwise we run the risk of seeming to learn about issues and problems that are not in fact uniquely African.

It is however, an important time to say something, since mobile learning in the developing regions of the world but especially Africa is arguably at a tipping point. We might soon be seeing mobile learning moving from a marginal, fragmented and specialized but very persistent research community out to a wider community of policy makers, institutional managers, educational practitioners and commercial stakeholders. The signs are starting to appear. In October 2010, for example, the UNESCO Chair in e-Learning in Barcelona sponsored an international seminar that focused on mobiles, learning and development. At about the same time the GSMA Development Fund published its mLearning: A Platform for Educational Opportunities at the Base of the Pyramid (GSMA 2010), intended to give the mobile network operators (MNOs) a sense of the possible business case. In February 2011, the World Mobile Congress in Barcelona sponsored its first awards for learning and attracted an impressive field from organizations working in development. In August 2011, USAID convened the first m4Ed4Dev symposium in Washington DC as a prelude to launching the mEducation Alliance in early 2012. In November 2011, the WISE debate in Qatar focused on mobiles, education and the hard-to-reach. In December 2011, UNESCO in Paris organized its first Mobile Learning Week as the opening of a three-year collaboration with Nokia, with a programme of outputs including policy guidelines and support for teacher development. The World Economic Forum Annual Meeting in January 2012 reviewed a report on mobile learning, while UNESCO jointly hosted an International Symposium in Washington, DC, in March 2012.

Whether or not these are signs of a breakthrough, the following papers constitute an important milestone and contribution. They are not sequenced to make any particular point but we can make some general and some specific remarks.

In their paper on Smartphone-based Mobile Learning with Physician Trainees in Botswana, Chang and her colleagues report on a study of nineteen resident physicians who were provided with Smartphones pre-loaded with point-of-care applications aimed at supporting and facilitating the decision-making processes at the patient’s bed-side. Despite Smartphones providing wider options for developing mlearning interventions in medicine, that would address health care problems and achieve an educational outcome, the paper reports on challenges with downloading applications to the Smartphones due to low bandwidth in Botswana, and the unfamiliarity of the Smartphone among participants. The paper concludes that the biggest issues in mobile learning projects are scalability and sustainability.
Botha and Butgereit report on a project that uses a mobile social networking service (MXit) called Dr Math to scaffold learning of mathematics among secondary school learners. Dr Math MXit runs on low cost Java phones as well as on Smartphones. The WAP-enabled phones are increasingly pervasive, although accessing Internet on the mobile phone is relatively expensive. The Dr Math project exploits the fact that MXit is cheaper than SMS, most students have Java enabled phones, and draws on the generosity of community members to share knowledge, to recruit volunteers to serve as Tutors. The paper concludes that while Dr Math provides an enabling environment for students to engage in the learning of mathematics, it is the learners’ desire to learn and tutors’ willingness to teach which makes the project a success.

One of the ways of motivating students to learn mathematics is to design learning activities in the form of mobile games. In their paper, Nygren and colleagues report on a story-based game designed to allow game players to understand ubiquitous fractions. The paper addresses the question of the motivation of students to play educational mobile games, and provides a use taxonomy of play motivations, but also highlights some of the challenges of developing mobile applications for multiple mobile devices.

In his paper on social media-enhanced phones, Rambe observes that an increasing number of smartphones come preloaded with social-media applications such as Facebook. The use of social media-enhanced phones enables the convergence of the social, media and technology dimensions into unprecedented learning experiences for users. However, most students are not exploiting these affordances because of lack of access to smartphones or poor digital literacy skills.

In their paper on using a participatory action research approach to design a lecture podcasting system, Mugwanya et al. emphasize the need for user participation in mobile learning application design. They observe that applications where would-be users are involved in the design process are most likely to be useful for users. According to Mugwanya et al. the consequence of not involving users is that they adapt to the technology rather than technology adapting to users’ practices. Reporting on how an Action Research approach was used to recruit user participation in the design and development process of a mobile podcasting application, the paper provides useful insights based on key lessons learnt from the study.

Finally, then, this special edition provides a valuable snapshot of Africa’s mobile learning milestones. We hope that it will both inform and inspire future mobile learning research across the continent.

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