Welcome to the special edition of the International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning, devoted exclusively to articles selected from the 2008 mLearn conference that took place in October in Ironbridge UK. The first in the mLearn conference series, at that time modestly entitled the European Workshop on Mobile and Contextual Learning (http://www.eee.bham.ac.uk/mlearn/), took place in 2002 at Birmingham University. Seven years later mLearn returned to Britain, this time to the UNESCO World Heritage site at Ironbridge in Shropshire with a four-day event with delegates coming from most countries in Europe and from every other continent. The conference themes and submissions addressed many of the challenges currently facing the mobile learning research community.

The first theme, that of mobile learning, mobile knowledge and mobile societies embraced current ideas about the relationships between discourse, identity and knowledge and ideas about learning with pervasive, ubiquitous and mobile technologies and also covered the social, individual and cultural aspects of mobile learning. The devices, systems, technology and standards theme looked at technology and devices themselves and at topics of convergence, diversity, frontiers and trends. The mobile learning landscape theme was the focus for innovative projects, programmes and initiatives in work-based, informal, subject-specific and context-aware mobile learning that extend the mobile learning evidence base. Finally, the mobile learning for all theme covering inclusion, assistivity, scalability, embedding, participation, evaluation, evidence, assessment and development and explored mobile learning in the context of broader educational priorities.

The articles selected for this special edition span these themes and include a unique contribution from one of the five keynote speakers, Yrjö Engeström from the University of Helsinki. Previously his work on ‘activity theory’ has informed and perhaps inspired much of the theorising that has underpinned mobile learning (see for example, Sharples et al, 2007; Wali et al, 2008). This new contribution looks however at Wildfire activities: new patterns of mobility and
learning. It places mobility and learning together in an historical context before abstracting and analysing a mode of informal mobile learning that transcends the current incarnation of mobile learning based around technology. Law and Urry (2004) observed that, ”[Existing methods of investigation] deal, for instance, poorly with the fleeting – that which is here today and gone tomorrow, only to re-appear again the day after tomorrow. They deal poorly with the distributed – that is to be found here and there but not in between – or that which slips and slides between one place and another. They deal poorly with the multiple – that which takes different shapes in different places. They deal poorly with the non-causal, the chaotic, the complex. And such methods have difficulty dealing with the sensory – that which is subject to vision, sound, taste, smell; with the emotional – time-space compressed outbursts of anger, pain, rage, pleasure, desire, or the spiritual; and the kinaesthetic – the pleasures and pains which follow the movement and displacement of people, objects, information and ideas.” These remarks come not from researchers within the mobile learning community but from two researchers from the mobilities community. They do however seem to be covering exactly the territory that Engeström now explores. His piece contributes to a greater understanding of the wider context of learning with mobility, in our case with mobile technologies, and will catalyse new perspectives and theorising within the mobile learning research community.

Designing Participant-Generated Context into Guided Tours by Juliet Sprake of Goldsmiths, University of London addressed the most obvious topic of the conference, the one highlighted in the slogan ‘from text to context’, namely context-aware informal mobile learning. Juliet brings together a number of diverse conceptual perspectives and metaphors to help us theorise and enrich context, space and place and their relationship to learning and empowerment.

Improving cross-cultural awareness and communication through mobile technologies by Adele Botha and Madelein van den Berg from the Meraka Institute in South Africa working with Steve Vosloo and John Kuner from Stanford University does just what it says and is fascinating for the way it links the concerns of the mobile learning community, especially informal learning and the web2.0 agenda, with insights into the cultures evolving around mobile technologies, documented elsewhere by Katz and Aakhus (2002) and by Ling (2004) amongst others. At a practical level, work like this can be enormously valuable in informing how those of us who are educators can engage what one might, over-simplistically, call mobile natives.

Turning to evaluation, one respected evaluator of e-learning and ICT (Somekh, 2001: 101) has summed up the challenges and hinted at the wider context, saying: “Evaluation is a fascinating, socially useful, morally demanding and highly politicised activity. Its future depends on the uses we put it to, and the role it is given by sponsors and politicians.” An analysis of existing evaluation practice
within the mobile learning community (Traxler & Kukulska-Hulme, 2005) did however show that there was room for considerable improvement in both methods and underlying philosophy. “Meeting the Challenges in Evaluating Mobile Learning: a 3-level Evaluation Framework” by Giasemi Vavoula of the University of Leicester and Mike Sharples of the University of Nottingham puts evaluation on a much more systematic and comprehensive footing and sets the standard for subsequent improvements across the community. The proposed framework, reaching from innovation through to deployment, should contribute to the kinds of credible and authoritative evaluations that will unlock increased public finance for mobile learning in schools, colleges and universities.

Even more than evaluation, ethics in mobile learning has been largely overlooked and so Ethical considerations in implementing mobile learning in the workplace by Jocelyn Wishart of the University of Bristol is a welcome and necessary addition especially as it addresses both ethics in mobile learning evaluation and mobile learning deployment. The nuances of ethical issues across sectors and counties continue to surprise researchers and practitioners, and sometimes to be poorly understood by ethics review boards and professional bodies ethical codes. The piece is particularly welcome since an earlier analysis (Traxler & Kukulska-Hulme, 2005) had revealed little or no documented engagement with the ethical aspects in evaluations of mobile learning and the more established perspectives from the ethics of researching e-learning seem to be inappropriate (for example, Anderson & Kanuka, 2003; Hewson et al., 2003; Hine, 2003 Buchanan, 2004). Jocelyn explicitly addresses workplace mobile learning but many of her conclusions have a much wider significance and her proposed framework is a concrete contribution to reasoning about ethical issues. Those observations about the behaviour and expectations of young people with their mobile devices in the UK in this piece complement the observations of Adele Botha and her colleagues of young people in Pretoria and San Francisco.

All the contributions here and at the conference itself represent only a snapshot of where the mobile learning research community is currently positioned. Even from the five contributions in this special edition, we can however infer an increased maturity and consolidation as mobile learning research engages with broader contemporary social concerns and develops a greater awareness of the wider social environment. Looking for relationships between the various contributions is an interesting and rewarding exercise. Incidentally Adele Botha and Juliet Sprake received well deserved awards for their contributions to mLearn2008.

REFERENCES


Somekh, B. (2001). The role of evaluation in ensuring excellence in communications and information technology initiatives. *Education, Communications and Information*, 1, 75-10
