User Generated Content & Mobile Technologies: From Consumers to Creators bypassing the Learning Opportunity?

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Welcome to the special edition of the International Journal of Mobile and Blended Learning devoted to papers exclusively selected from the 2009 IADIS Mobile Learning Conference which was held in February 2009 in Barcelona, Spain. This conference series was inaugurated in Malta in 2005 and it is the longest standing annual international mobile learning conference after MLearn. The Barcelona event was the 5th edition and received 117 submissions from authors from 29 countries representing most European nations and every other continent. The conference theme was User Generated Content and Mobile Technologies. In particular, the organisers’ objective was to explore whether a pedagogical use of media creation with mobile technologies is taking place and if users are availing themselves of the learning opportunities afforded by media creation with mobile technologies. The foregoing implied the need to elucidate whether the shift from traditional ‘former audience’ activities such as searching, reading, watching and listening, to ‘creator’ activities such as producing, commenting, sharing and classifying is taking place, and if so, how.

The topics of the conference ranged from pedagogical methods and theories for mlearning, to the exploration of specific approaches such as collaborative, cooperative and contextual learning; the investigation of types of learning and settings, for instance informal and lifelong learning and formal educational settings. In addition, other topics provided a context to present research on user studies and the social phenomenon of mobility, the development of tools, technologies and platforms, as well as speculative ideas regarding the future of mlearning. Surprisingly, the call seemed ahead of the research in the field since a substantial amount of the work presented engaged with a ‘consumer’ rather than ‘creator’ view of mobile media creation.

This special edition contains five contributions. The keynote paper by Hiroaki Ogata entitled “Supporting Awareness in Ubiquitous Learning” presents a technological perspective of ubiquitous learning requirements and focuses on the concept of awareness. It discusses five types of awareness: social, task, concept, workspace and knowledge which may initiate learning in ubiquitous learning contexts. Task awareness, knowing how to accomplish a task; concept awareness, knowing how knowledge fits into pre-existing knowledge; and knowledge awareness: being aware of what one knows and doesn’t know seem to be most relevant for harnessing the learning potential of mobile media ‘creator’ activities. Ogata’s paper also presents four applications: TANGO and LOCH apply directly to ‘consumer’ types of activities; PERKAM and LORAMS provide scope for ‘media’ creator activities such as commenting, sharing and actual media creation.

The second article, “Premierløytnant BIELKE: a Mobile Game for Teaching and Learning History” by Jo Dugstad Wake and Rune Baggetun, presents the design and pilot evaluation of a mobile location-based game for history learning. The game utilises the surroundings and milieu of a town to support the players’ creation of meaning in relation to a historical period and its events. Through its missions, the game provides a context for ‘audience’ activities such as reading and watching (maps and instructions), and searching. Unlike in more traditional searching activities, the searching supported by Premierløytnant BIELKE is location based and has players roaming a town. Although
the game does not support media ‘creator’ activities task and knowledge awareness appear to be underpinning the successful completion of the game.

The third contribution of this issue, “A Mobile and Context-Aware Learning Schedule Suggestion Mechanism Framework,” by Jane Yin-Kim Yau and Mike Joy, describes the design of a theoretical framework to support learning in different locations and with different time availability. In their analysis of related work, the authors claim that in-built software in mobile devices is not designed to support learning since ‘audience’ activities such as reading course content and attending lectures (presumably implying listening to the lecturer) are not supported by them. Interestingly, the paper argues implicit learning is denoted by people who behave as if they have learnt something but have difficulty reporting what they have learnt. Following from this, it may be suggested that ‘creator’ activities may provide learners with means to ‘articulate’ what they have learnt. The analysis of empirical data from an interview study which explores the relevance of five learning contexts for a personalised mobile learning application, leads the authors to conclude that individual m-learning and learning environment preferences should form the basis for suggesting appropriate materials for each learner.

Thomas Cochrane and Roger Bateman provide the 4th article of this issue, “Transforming Pedagogy Using Mobile Web 2.0.” Their work reports on the transformation of a product design course from a traditional face-to-face studio approach to a mobile web 2.0 one. In addition to being very relevant to the field, given that it reports on an experience that has been ongoing since 2006, it is the study that better represents the potential of mobile technologies to support ‘creator’ activities. The article describes how mobile devices and social software such as blogs are used to record, upload, collate, comment and reflect upon evidence of the students’ design process. Thus, mobile and web2.0 technologies seem to support the articulation of implicit learning as articulated in the contribution by Yau and Joy through the ‘bread crumb trail’ the media created by the participants leaves. The authors report the media ‘creator’ activities the participants engaged in increased interaction and helped students improve their editing skills. By and large, students captured and shared more images than made blog entries which the authors suggest shows a preference of this medium over traditional writing.

The last contribution of this special edition, “Engaging Students with Mobile Technologies to Support their Formal and Informal Learning” is by Melanie Ciussi, Gill Rosner and Marc Augier. In their contribution the authors declare the death of two myths: 1. regardless of commonly adopted discourses, the ‘net generation’ are not digital natives; 2. despite of the availability of ever-connected, portable technologies, students do not want to learn all the time. Additionally, the article presents data from a project aiming to support English learning in an informal learning setting with podcasts. Results from this study indicate that students will not engage with informal learning through podcasts unless the activities are part of a formal curriculum.

The contributions of this issue and those made at the conference represent but a snapshot of research in the field of mobile learning and in particular on the theme of User Generated Content and Mobile Technologies. However, it would seem that the work being reported falls by and large under the ‘former audience’ camp and is concerned with supporting more traditional activities such as searching, reading, watching and listening. Following in the footsteps of IADIS Mobile Learning 2009, IEEE WMUTE 2010 has adopted the theme Mobile Social Media. We look forward to the
contributions presented at this event and are hopeful to see more research emerging from the media creator domain which leverages the affordances of mobile technologies to support activities such as producing, commenting, sharing and classifying.