The introduction of mobile tools into our classroom spaces ought to be a catalyst for remarkable possibility and genuine change in how we engage learners in the work we pursue together. It should be a moment where we look collectively at what is now possible in how we engage and learn alongside our students, and were we do some cultivating that allows us to pull out less timely practices or tools and evolve to what our students need now. It should be a vibrant time.

Reality is different (or else we wouldn’t be hungrily turning to this volume for ideas and inspiration). It’s easy in schools to get caught in the “what if’s” particularly as schools, as institutions, are marked by clear boundaries which mobile tools and digital practices easily disrupt or transcend. As such, in too many contexts, we respond to the burst of mobile tools which students carry into our schools by limiting access and use until we can determine the safest, most “schoolified” uses of the digital tool – and, which, according to our students leads us to offer the striped-down, joyless iteration of the tool or app or practice. We emphasize consumption rather than creation. We control rather than open.

I spent last week in a high school where the solution to the “problem” student cell phones present is to line them up on the chalk tray at the start of every class. And, in open defiance, students set the ringers to buzz, leading to a line-up of always present and always on devices that might pull attention from a lesson at any given moment. Signs littered the halls reminding students of the “cell phone free zones” and kids had found multiple creative ways to get access to what was forbidden.

The exception to the rule? Ms. Stevenson’s eleventh grade English class. As department chair, she had started the year by asking students to define the word “mobile” so that they could work together to rethink what access might mean in their classroom work. The anchor chart which captured ideas from their discussion and hangs in the classroom lists their ideas under the heading “Mobile Means.” It reads: constant access, pushing past easy answers to get to harder questions, connecting when it matters, participation, expression, and without wires or walls or boundaries. This list is what guides their practice. When the use of a phone or iPad or tablet allows them to do something more robust in one of these areas, it is permitted.
it does not, it is expected to be in a pocket or a backpack. And, four months into their experiment, there have been zero instances of issue in the classroom. As Ms. Stevenson explains, “when I started to respect what mobile tools brought into our space alongside what students wanted to use them do to, we were off.”

In stark contrast to the chalk-tray line-up of potentially offending devices, Ms. Stevenson’s class was using the Goosechase app to design a scavenger hunt in the media center which was to be used by local eighth graders who were coming to visit the high school as impending students but also as readers. In small groups, students were creating a multimedia, multimodal game which would lead users to playfully encounter the holdings of the stacks, key areas for learning support in the media center, and interactive videos with teachers, student readers, and staff. It was a simple, one-day assignment – but the white-board also listed six state standards which the activity was engaging as well as an invitation from the county librarian to come to the local library to create a similar hunt should this one prove as exciting as it sounded. As she supported her students and triaged where necessary, Ms. Stevenson kept an annotated list of observations she saw under each of their categories, noting, for example, a moment when a group selected to put their tools away and explore the stacks (defying expectation by putting phones in their pockets in order to read), or the moment when that same group turned to their tool to direct message a YA author through Twitter in the hopes that she might join them in a recorded google hangout to be used as a part of the project. She did so as part of the feedback to the groups and to the school, offering “one, I want the kids to see what I saw in terms of the moments when their choices were about learning and, two, I need to be able to explain to my colleagues what is possible when we think with and not just against what adolescents can do with so much creative capacity.”

It is crucial that I emphasize that Ms. Stevenson is teaching in a high-poverty, richly-diverse and food unstable school where test scores are far from the priority. In other words, she is teaching in the classrooms that Leu, Forzani, and Kennedy (2015) and Selywn (2012) argue are far less likely to engage students in purposeful work using digital tools to create or connect rather than simply to consume information. This secondary digital divide is what I would argue is the most important challenge for us to consider as we look at our mobile and digital learning initiatives.

Early into my career, I was assigned the task of “turning around” a group of students who had been exercising their digital skills to attack the school network or to override the filters to access gaming sites. I remember meeting the students, looking around the room, and realizing that for these students, school was likely the single place where they had consistent internet access. And, that when digital media is central to your participation, you go to great lengths to get access to what is forbidden. As much as we used that as an opportunity to create a SWAT (Students Working to Assist with Technology) team where this team of kids helped teachers
learn about the technologies that would be most helpful to their classroom work, I used it as an opportunity to look closely at what their technology experiences looked like in school.

Almost every student in that room was in a remedial reading class, where technology use required reading passages and keying in “A, B, or C” in response to a set of comprehension questions. That was the full sum total of their instructional time in front of a computer, despite their interest, literacies, and capacities. Change came slowly, but what we had to learn to do was take in each new technology, opportunity, device, etc. and ask – how can we use this to authentically engage and move the skills of the students who are not achieving? – rather than slotting them immediately into the AP and Honors classrooms. And, we needed to push past seeing kids actively working on a phone as a sign of their digital literacy skill – and thinking that they have things figured out. Instead, we needed to think hard on how to engage every child as a digital reader, writer, and thinker – with the most powerful tools we can provide them with access to.

You have in your hands a book that provides the guidance that we need to do this work well. *Empowering Learners With Mobile Open-Access Initiatives* provides clarity, insight, and direction for educators who are working to build meaningful opportunities for learners to engage and grow their mobile and digital literacy skills in service of doing work that does work. These are k-18 opportunities and examples that challenge each of us to reconsider emerging pedagogies that help us shift into new thinking about the roles of teacher and student.

So, what are the questions we need to ask of this volume? This is a text that helps us consider mobile learning, inventiveness in expressive media created by learners, deliberate cultivation of digital footprints and identities, and participation in different kinds of networked publics as powerful outcomes when learning becomes constant and ubiquitous just as devices might provide in access. It is powerful and visionary. That said, Ms. Stevenson and her students would remind us to ask – for which communities is mobile learning with digital media, social media and participatory learning a positive or negative force? How do we move forward to support all learners and not just deepen or widen existing gaps? And, how can we work to learn alongside our students while developing newly responsive pedagogies that transcend and reimagine what school can be?

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REFERENCES
