Chapter 1
Mobiles, Movement, and Meaning-Making:
A Model of Mobile Literacy

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ABSTRACT
Drawing on ethnographic research conducted with adolescents at a rural Australian high school, this chapter constructs a theoretical model for “mobile literacy.” Mobile technologies, and their increasing technological capabilities, present emerging challenges for definitions and understandings of what precisely constitutes “literate practice,” challenges which have not been wholly resolved though more disparate discussions of “electronically mediated communication.” Such an understanding is important in order to develop approaches that effectively integrate mobile technologies into formal educational contexts. The model constructed in this chapter draws on different theoretical traditions where literacy is concerned, combining these with a sociological model developed by Pierre Bourdieu, to draw out the importance of the social dimension in mobile technology use. The ethnographic methodology results in findings that reveal the structuring impact of economic, social, cultural, and symbolic resources associated with these devices. Far from revealing that mobiles free us from a consideration of “place,” this research demonstrates that to be “mobile literate” is to be even more finely attuned to the contextual factors for any mobile technology use.

INTRODUCTION
The genesis for this research has been the emerging popularity, ubiquity and pervasiveness of mobile technologies across widely divergent cultures, especially amongst the young. In particular, for the field of education, mobile technologies have proven to be a particularly problematic technology, in part due to the disruption they cause to power relationships traditionally central to curriculum and pedagogy. Studies of contemporary and emerging literacy practices have typically grouped mobile technologies (such as smartphones and iPods) into a collective group with other emerging ICTs and electronically-mediated texts.
However, this research contended that the very ‘mobility’ of these devices, was what singled these devices out as a potential seismic shift in literate practice. There was also an emerging field of research examining the literacy potential and value of SMS-language: an approach which was somewhat conservative and restrictive in terms of the potentials of mobile technologies for future communication practices. Within a short amount of time, society had gone from mobile phone handsets which could make phone calls and send SMS-messages, to phones with cameras, calendars, games, music, MMS, Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, internet, email, and other downloadable applications (consider the ‘iPhone Apps Store’ for instance). Additionally, because these devices were used at the everyday level, across a wide range of social situations, the role of context in the meaning of any mobile-related text, needed to be considered. What are the contexts for both sender and recipient when the text “? U” is sent between two people? Because without an understanding of their variable situations, as well as their relationship, the text is relatively meaningless; such considerations of audience and context are central concerns of literacy scholarship. However, there was at the time of this research, no direct, detailed and methodological study of literacy as it pertained to mobile technologies.

This paper is based upon research conducted for PhD studies at Monash University, Australia (Taylor 2011). Being based upon data collected across 2007 and 2008 – does create a degree of time-restriction related to its historical context. Since this data collection there have been a number of advancements that had the potential to change the outlook and possibly results. However, by focusing on patterns of human behaviour rather than technical devices in and of themselves, it is hoped that this research will develop a theoretical model which can speak to wider experiences beyond the limitations of particular societies and time periods.

This chapter offers an overview of an attempt to speak to a gap in research and theory. In offering a model of mobile literacy, it seeks to help build pathways into educational reform: mobiles are coming to our classroom and our pedagogies – in some senses, they’re already there – and educators need to find uses for them that are beneficial for learning.

THE CHALLENGE OF MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES

They’re everywhere: the increasing ubiquity and pervasiveness of mobile technologies throughout increasing societies (regardless of geographic or socioeconomic) has resulted in changes to the structure of social, cultural and interpersonal communication practices.

Across the vast swathe of research and literature addressing the impact of mobile technologies, a central assertion underpins the drive to understand: the unprecedented rapidity with which mobile technologies have disseminated widely throughout the world (see Katz & Aakhus, 2002; Ling & Pedersen, 2005). The significance for research and scholarship is the way that this globally-popular behaviour is manifested at the local level. As Castells, Fernández-Ardèvol, Qui and Sey point out in their global survey of wireless communication: ‘Wireless communication has diffused faster than any other communication technology in history. But it has done so differentially’ (2007, p. 7). Whilst it is clear that globally, mobile communication technologies have had a pervasive impact – across societies as diverse as Europe, Africa and Oceania – variation at the local level paints a slightly different approach to adoption and domestication in each case.

It is beyond the scope of this restricted section to fully outline the complexity of the effect mobile technologies have had on many different aspects of human experience: this is in fact the purpose of this very collection of papers and others like
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