Chapter XIII
Designing Situated Learning Experiences

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ABSTRACT

To ensure the success of future mobile learning environments, it is essential to develop affordable and effective applications that are well matched to the needs of the users. Depending on their unique requirements, effective mobile learning applications should keep up with their learning activities rather than simply providing them with conventional course materials on mobile devices. As an early exploration of this line of study, this chapter designs and evaluates a location-aware learning organizer that helps university students to manage their learning activities on campus. We confirmed that this situated learning support experience could lead to markedly different in-depth learning activities. Empirical testing of the learning organizer also revealed some potential opportunities for the learners to be more engaged in further mobile learning activities.

INTRODUCTION

Mobile technologies now allow us to explore new opportunities around “m-” neologisms such as m-office, m-government, m-commerce, m-health, m-learning, and so forth. The prevalent mobile paradigm inevitably continues to change the ways in which people fulfill their lives. For instance, several government-funded mobile-based research projects presented increasing possibilities to make some societal changes with relevant mobile technologies, e.g., anti-alcohol education (Demirjian & David, 1995), quit-smoking program (Horwood, 2003) and HIV/AIDS education programs in African countries (Swedish International Development Agency started this program in 2002 and since). These mobile-based education programs exploited the penetration of mobile devices and technologies as the medium of delivery of the learning contents, which might
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indicate effective learning (or education) experiences from the learner’s perspective. These mobile learning programs are still evolving with the widespread support of pervasive computing environments, capturing more direct contextual information and providing appropriate learning contents at the right time and the right place.

Regardless of one’s intentions, all of us can learn something from our daily lives, such as from museum visits or consultation with doctors, which is what is principally meant by the premises of pervasive or ubiquitous learning environments. Atkins (2005) coined this particular type of learning activity as ‘informal learning’, normally a very situation-oriented and more goal and task-oriented activity, compared to the formal learning experience offered by most educational institutions. In particular, as the cost of mobile computing devices has fallen well below that of conventional desktop machines, we have been designing new learning activities employing novel mobile or wireless technologies, enabling access to pedagogical applications anywhere and anytime (Becerra-Fernandez, Cousins, & Weber, 2007; Eschenbrenner & Nah, 2007; Kukulska-Hulme, 2007).

This dominant mobile paradigm has changed the underlying pedagogical experiences of what we have hitherto taken for granted, namely traditional face-to-face or distance learning (or e-learning) experiences from educational institutions. Several researchers (e.g., Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005; Rogers et al., 2005) have claimed that the most important change mobile learning (m-learning) can make, which traditional learning experiences cannot achieve, is that learners can be hooked into the situations where learning actually occurs (e.g., the binge drinkers in the pub or the smokers outside), proactively putting themselves in control of what and how they choose to learn. An early example quoted in one of the Pan-European m-learning projects is thus worth returning to:

“If you walk as a tourist around an archaeological site in Greece, you may be interested in what this heritage is about, how long it took to build, what historical accounts are, and et cetera. But it is very unlikely that you will take notes in order to undertake further research when you get back home...”

This seems to imply a significant loss of potential learning opportunities associated with the place where the learning could happen. That is, situated learning is not just for the classroom or intentional learning activities, but for the world outside classroom doors, which would be a better learning arena in many cases.

We should, however, be cautious about applying these anecdotaly plausible stories to other learning activities, especially those occurring in formal education sectors. Indeed, people, institutions, universities, and businesses have suffered enough from the prophecies of futurologists who promise and project that “mobile X” would be the virtue of everything in the near future. In effect, what we need to do is to take the measure of when and how this kind of situated learning activity would best serve pedagogical purposes in traditional learning arenas.

There are, therefore, a number of concerns regarding the outcomes from this new type of learning activity. Kukulska-Hulme and Traxler (2005) stated that m-learning alone may not find it easy to attract university learners, to engage them with educational activities, and keep their motivation during learning activities, thanks to its un-intentionality or distraction (Ryu & Parsons, 2007). Also, chapter V in this book shows the “one-size-fits-all” fallacy that m-learning researchers may find themselves trapped by. The primary issue to be addressed in the development of future m-learning systems therefore may be how to associate (or bridge) these new learning experiences with more conventional ones in order to ensure their usefulness. Indeed, there have been
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