Chapter 10
Mobile 2.0: Crossing the Border into Formal Learning?

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ABSTRACT

Many practitioners are looking for ways to bring the vitality of Mobile 2.0—for example, social networking via a mobile phone (cellphone), or photo sharing on a mobile blog—into formal learning and teaching. But they face a complex and even paradoxical challenge: how can they harness that vitality without stifling its most distinctive feature—the fact that it is user led? This chapter begins with an analysis of that paradox as a foundation for understanding the challenges that practitioners face now and in the future. Drawing on data from interviews with six experienced tertiary practitioners, the authors describe and analyze a number of examples that point to the particular power of mobile devices to blur formal and informal activity in people’s lives. The aim is to look beyond the hype around innovations in mobile devices and connectivity to focus on the opportunities for practitioners to bend the arc of Mobile 2.0 to the needs of their learners.

INTRODUCTION

The border referred to in the chapter title has the sunny territory of Mobile 2.0 on one side of it. That is where people update their online status while sitting at a café, upload their photos on Flickr while walking by the river, and access Wikipedia from the train. It is where personal interest and enjoyment fuel billions of interactions. It is Web 2.0 on sleek mobile devices.

On the other side of the border lies the territory of formal learning. At the moment it is not so sunny. Indeed many of its long-term inhabitants—practitioners in colleges and universities—look across the border and wonder whether they can bring some of that energy and vitality over to their side and into formal education. It may not be easy: a 2008 report commissioned by the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC), based on data from more than 1,000 first-year university students in the UK, found that the rationale for “using social networking sites for formal teach-
ing purposes” (Ipsos MORI, 2008, p. 7, emphasis added) was less obvious to these students than was the case with many other information and communications technology (ICT) services. This was despite the fact (or perhaps because of the fact) that over two-thirds of the respondents, who were nearly all aged 18 or 19, used social networking sites “regularly” for their own purposes (Ipsos MORI, 2008, p. 14).

The two opening paragraphs above reveal the dilemma for tertiary practitioners: how can they mobilize the benefits of Web 2.0 and Mobile 2.0 for their teaching without destroying what is most distinctive and interesting about Web 2.0/Mobile 2.0, that is, the fact that it is driven by users? To quote the JISC report again, “Use of social networks … does not feel right when led by the teacher” (Ipsos MORI, 2008, p. 36). That position—even though the authors of the report raise the possibility that it may be more applicable to first-year students than to more advanced students—provides a considerable challenge for practitioners.

Helping to meet such challenges is the key purpose in this chapter, which draws on a wide range of literature to provide pointers and examples, and looks at some of the possible futures for Mobile 2.0. The chapter draws on the authors’ own research into practitioners’ use of mobile devices to suggest that it is the blending of the personal and the formal—as much as concerns about the distinction between “1.0” and “2.0”—that may hold the key to resolving the dilemma set out above.

**OWNERSHIP IN TERTIARY EDUCATION**

The metaphor of the two territories with which the chapter opened is, of course, an over-simplification. The differences are not so stark or the border so clear, and this chapter seeks to explore a more nuanced understanding of how Mobile 2.0 can enrich formal learning. Nevertheless, there is a sense that tertiary education has been seriously challenged by the phenomenon of Web 2.0/Mobile 2.0, where users generate and share content and have considerable ownership.

This has happened at a time when mobile devices—whether handhelds, or portables such as laptops—have arrived on campus largely on the learners’ own terms. These devices support what one report, based on a study in 2006 of over 400 “technology-savvy” UK students, described as an “underworld of communication and information-sharing invisible to tutors” (Conole & Creanor, 2007, p. 11). The use of “underworld” here is not so much sinister as making the point that these students, who indicate one likely future for tertiary education, use their own devices in their own ways to support their learning.

These trends resonate with Downes’ (2006) challenge that “the students own education.” How to meet that challenge, or variants of it, is one of the issues at the heart of this book in general, and the present chapter in particular. For many professionals in teaching and learning it is a pressing concern. How, for example, might they harness the power of photo sharing, one of the most vibrant of the participatory practices that can be found within Mobile 2.0? Could they use it in a teaching program on the built environment or ecology, for instance, where students would use their mobile phones (cellphones) to upload images of a building they have just walked past, or of a plant they have found in a meadow? Later in the chapter, some of the issues involved in doing this are considered.

**CO-EXISTING PARADIGMS**

It is also worth noting how far Web 2.0 and Mobile 2.0 co-exist with earlier but not necessarily inferior paradigms of social and educational communication. A practice with “2.0” in its name seems to assert that it is an evolutionary improvement on its predecessor. However, there is still much to be said
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