Chapter 4

Beyond Mobile Learning: Identity Construction and the Development of Social Awareness

André H. Caron
Université de Montréal, Canada

Letizia Caronia
Università di Bologna, Italy

Pascal Gagné
Université de Montréal, Canada

ABSTRACT

Contemporary research on mobile learning focuses mainly on issues such as the acquisition of knowledge, the development of cognitive skills and the efficiency of these tools with respect to the achievement of specific educational goals. Nonetheless, the consequences of the adoption of a technology within a learning context for educational purposes should not be reduced solely to the cognitive dimension implied in its use, nor should it be measured only in terms of goal achievement. Even if intended as purely educational tools, technologies are complex social objects that redefine the sense of the context, the activity and even the identity of the actors engaged in their use. When educational institutions adopt mobile information technologies they propose more than a supposedly efficient educational instrument or technology-formatted contents. They introduce a form of life. By form of life, we mean a repertoire of possible uses, actions, meanings and even intended actors that the users may adopt. A technology is then a condensed social context within which learning takes place. We might then ask, what kinds of learning are at stake? To grasp the richness and the complexity of the learning involved in using mobile information devices, we need a larger and holistic definition of learning that goes beyond simply acquiring knowledge on particular topics, or processing information for some formal educational purpose. Learning through mobile devices is a larger and complex process that involves different aspects of an individual’s psychological, cultural and social development. How does the use of an iPod affect the students’ identity? How does it contribute to the development of social skills and social awareness? Drawing on research involving 123 Canadian university students recruited from different disciplines (on the basis of data coming from diaries and focus groups), this chapter focuses on the multiple consequences of the introduction of this technology as an educational tool in students’ academic life.

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INTRODUCTION

A number of authors see a variety of aspects related to mobile learning. Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula and Sharples (2004) identify six major approaches to mobile learning: behaviourism (reinforcement of data by several repetitions), constructivism (immersive experiences supported by the device), situated learning (learning environments), collaborative learning (interactions such as gathering and sharing information), coordination (access to resources) and informal/lifelong learning (everyday experience). Each pedagogical perspective represents technology in a different way. Hence, each orientation has different learning objectives presumed in their design of learning activities with mobile devices.

The underlying assumption by many is that this new generation often referred to as “digital natives” or “Y generation” will spontaneously and eagerly adopt an iPod or another type of mobile device for formal learning. However, many authors see this as to be partly unfounded and question these assumptions (Kennedy et al, 2006; Bachfischer et al, 2008; Caron Caronia, 2008). To some students, mobile learning devices are “just annoying”, “invasive”, “provides too much potential for distraction”, may weaken “the social aspects of talking and interacting with others” and cause “disengagement from social situations” (Bachfisher et al, 2006: 47).

But undeniably, the major change inherent in the mobile shift is linked to the fusion of boundaries between the private (or personal) sphere and the public (or social) sphere. This phenomenon goes well beyond the simple transfer of traditional tasks specific to a domain in the time and space specific to the “Other”. Much more radically, communication and mobile information technologies have transformed every public space into a stage where individual behavior becomes a social performance (Katz, & Aakhus, 2002; Caronia & Caron, 2004). The audience is undeniably there, and participates - willingly or not - in the unfolding of the play. Obligatory captives, they seem to be drawn into a performance which they did not necessarily decide to attend, and yet they constantly condition it. Whatever one might believe, individual behavior is, from the outset, designed to be performed on the public stage. It is constantly adjusted to the involuntary audience and keeps traces of this script-writing process for the benefit of a third party that is always included. Whether it involves using earpieces of a digital device as acoustic screens (Gumpert & Drucker, 2007) or removing them to indicate availability for interaction, the attitude of the actors reflects their awareness of the Other. Even by ignoring their presence, wanting to be positioned as a solitary individual or deliberately unconcerned from Others’ standpoint is a behavior that requires a simulation effort.

In short, the use of new technologies is a communicative behavior in itself that can be compared with the enactment of oneself on the public stage (Goffman, 1967).

It is not surprising that the symbolic nature of the use of mobile technologies has been grasped by young users almost immediately following the introduction of the technologies. Although not all have the interest or expertise, most young people have been the best interpreters of this change and have very rapidly created behaviors, lifestyles and codes required to situate themselves in this mobile shift in contemporary society (Colombo, & Scifo, 2005; Kasesniemi & Rautianen, 2002; Ling, 1999; Lobet-Maris, 2003; Kasesniemi, 2003). Everything from their social ties, to the organization of their daily lives, the generation gap and cultural consumption is mediated by these devices, whose use is imperative to feel and be perceived as a member of a community of practices that shares “moving cultures” (Caron & Caronia, 2007). However, beyond the practical and utilitarian functions, beyond the advantages, the new possibilities of social networking, commu-
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