Chapter 17
Supporting Distance Users of Mobile Learning Technology

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ABSTRACT

With the rapid deployment of mobile devices, mobile learning emerges as a promising approach giving rise to a wide spectrum of new education possibilities. It serves as an effective conduit to deliver education to civilians of all social-economic levels, in particular the learners previously unreachable from traditional education systems, such as problem teenagers, social employees, and ageing people. Hence, unlike traditional education approaches, it is considered to be a good alternative to deal with the challenges posed by demographic shifts and social transformation. The purpose of this chapter is to: (i) identify the theoretical and technological underpinnings for delivering mobile learning to the distance learner, and (ii) discuss the possible learner communities that can benefit from mobile learning technology, with regard to their unique learning requirements and features.

INTRODUCTION

Increasingly, information and communication technologies, or ICTs, have started to permeate nearly every aspect of our lives. It not only dramatically alters the way we communicate, work and run businesses, but also gradually changes the way people access training and education. In particular, advance in broadband wireless network technology today enables mobile devices to transmit text, voice, video and animated images independent of time and location. This establishes a concrete technical basis for translating mobile learning from theory into actual practice.

The potential and impact of mobile learning are further enhanced in consideration of a worldwide proliferation of the mobile phone. A report from Portio Research (2007) predicts that the global
mobile penetration rate will surpass 50 percent in 2008, and further 1.5 billion new mobile phone users are expected to bring the overall penetration rate to 75 percent by 2011, in which 65 percent of new consumers will come from the Asia Pacific Region. The statistic is further confirmed by a recent report released by Euromonitor (Banjanovic, 2010), which indicates 4.0 billion mobile phone subscriptions in the world in 2008. In some parts of the world, such as Western Europe, the figure has already hit 100% since 2007. The worldwide penetration of mobile devices indicates that the number of potential users of mobile learning services has far exceeded the amount of students within the current education systems.

As mobile devices are becoming more and more sophisticated and affordable, they are increasingly equipped by ordinary consumers. As a result, it comes as no surprise that sooner or later people would begin to look for new ways to activate learners, in particular those with academic ambitions but reluctant to or can’t enroll in the formal education systems. A Europe-wide mobile learning project—m-learning, for instance, has been launched for the purpose of educationally disadvantaged young adults, such as teen dropouts and unemployed. In addition to common students, it is clear that a number of new learner communities could benefit and be involved, and become an indispensable part of the future mobile learning landscape. For audience, this chapter seeks to draw a brief picture of mobile learning in terms of its theoretical and technological underpinnings, and identify its potentials regarding a diversity of users.

**ENABLING MOBILE LEARNING IN SOCIAL CONTEXTS**

Knowledge has an inherent nature to mobilize in concert with people’s increasingly mobile lifestyle. Research indicates that learning activities happen frequently in daily lives. It can take place as long as people hope to start and adapt their activities to enable educational behavior and outcomes. Vavoula (2005) conducted a study on everyday adult learning episodes in which 161 learning episodes were reported from 15 participants in a research period of two weeks. Of the total 161 learning episodes, 51% of them took place at learners’ home or workplace, while 21%, 6%, 5% and 2% of episodes happened respectively in a workplace outside the office, at places of leisure, outdoors and in a friend’s house (Vavoula, 2005). Other locations took 14%, including places of worship, the doctor’s surgery rooms, cafes, hobby stores, and in cars. In addition to this, 48% of mobile episodes were found to be associated with work. Note that only 1% of the self-reported episodes occurred on public transport, indicating that there may be a chance to explore learning opportunities for people to utilize unproductive travelling time. These findings indicated that there are many learning episodes in daily lives where mobile learning can probably be involved and lend a helping hand.

Further, among all the learning episodes, mobile learning will be favored if a learner is situated in the ‘right’ scenario. Mobile learning can be advantageous, particularly when a learner is on the move or at a ‘non-place’. The term ‘non-place’ refers to places such as airport terminals, waiting halls and hotels (Kynäslahti & Seppälä, 2003), where people are physically immobile but mobile in logic. Also, mobile learning facilitates learning activities where a learner is in a stable scenario, such as learning in class, or in a situation where a learner wants to avoid moving, e.g., a patient following a daily prescription and diagnosis at home when the doctor is working in the hospital. At home, a bed or a sofa is the most often mentioned place by mobile device owners (Hujala, Kynäslahti & Seppälä, 2003), which shows a potentially ideal location for mobile learning. What is more, mobile learning is effective for just-in-time learning or learning in urgent situations, such as first aid (Kynäslahti, 2003).

In addition, a number of studies reveal that mobile technologies have many unique advantages...
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