Chapter 19
Implement Mobile Learning at Open Universities

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ABSTRACT

Mobile learning (m-learning) provides convenient access to course materials and other relevant information, especially for learners who are often on the move and cannot afford to spend hours and hours in the classroom, often the case at open universities. As such, implementing mobile learning at open universities makes even more sense. In this chapter we will explore a variety of issues, technologies, and challenges associated with implementing mobile learning at open universities. We will begin with an investigation into open universities’ common mandate and their very nature, and then explain the urgency and advantages for implementing mobile learning in their course and program delivery; we then explore the technical requirements of mobile learning, and present some strategies for mobile learning implementation. We will also explore some architectures and technologies for mobile learning systems. We will conclude the chapter by exploring some of the challenges one may have to face when implementing mobile learning at an open university.

INTRODUCTION

Education provided by open universities is mainly for people who wish to pursue higher education on a part-time basis and through distance learning. Hence, students at open universities are often full-time employed or have other commitment such as taking care of kids at home. Because of this very reality, students at open universities are often on the move with fractions of time available for study. They may be traveling on a business trip (Peters, 2006); they may be at a job site in a remote area (Tucker et al., 2009); they may be in a park overseeing kids playing. It is desirable...
for them to utilize the fractions of time they may have in between their normal activities during the day to study. Mobile learning is the solution to make this desire become a reality (Ragus, 2007; Keegan, 2004; Facer et al. 2005; Collins, 2005).

Open Universities’ Advantages for Mobile Learning

Mobile learning is learning through mobile devices. Implementing mobile learning requires capable mobile devices, quality learning objects and materials suitable for mobile devices, reliable server services to feed the quality learning objects and materials to mobile devices, and reliable communication network to connect the servers and mobile devices. Fortunately, open universities often have several advantages in implementing mobile learning. In this section, we will explore these advantages in the context of mobile learning implementation.

To implement and deploy mobile learning in open universities such as Athabasca University of Canada, two conditions must be met. Firstly, there must be a significant number of students who have the necessary mobile devices of some sorts to use; the second is that there must be some well designed learning objects accessible for mobile learners to put on their specific mobile devices. Without a large number of potential users, any implementation and deployment of mobile learning would be a waste; without some well designed learning objects available for mobile learners, the potential users of mobile learning won’t be using the system.

Generally speaking, open universities (Wikipedia, 2010) are well equipped with resources and expertise for online course production. Benefited from many years of business practice and experience in course production and delivery for distance learners, it is much easier and more convenient for open universities to relocate their personnel and resources to produce courses for e-learning and m-learning. More importantly, compared with traditional universities and colleges, open universities often have a well established business model to deliver creditable degree programs through distance education. This will make their courses and programs developed for delivery through e-learning and mobile learning systems more attractive to potential distance learners.

Compared to traditional universities, another advantage open universities have in implementing e-learning and mobile learning technologies and systems for distance learning is that students at open universities are more motivated and self-disciplined because they are mostly adult learners. They came to a program or course not because someone else wanted them to. They chose to take the program or course for a clear and good reason, and they are determined to succeed in the course and program.

Because students at open universities are mostly adults, they are more likely to have the ability to plan and manage their study. They are more self-disciplined compared to young learners just graduated from high schools. When using mobile devices for mobile learning, they are less likely to be distracted by the fancy and entertainment features such as games. That won’t be a concern for educators who develop and deliver mobile learning components in their courses.

At open universities, students are not only adults, but also mostly employed. They either already have mobile devices needed for their work and communication needs, or they have the financial ability to purchase one for their personal use. Therefore, they are better equipped with necessary mobile devices needed for mobile learning.

The Urgency for Implementing Mobile Learning at Open Universities

In the previous section, we have shown that open universities have several advantages when implementing mobile learning, compared to traditional universities. We hence proved the feasibility of implementing mobile learning at open universities.
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