



Increasing Access through Mobile Learning

Mohamed Ally and Avgoustos Tsinakos (Eds) (2014), Commonwealth of Learning and Athabasca University, Canada. ISBN: 978-1-894975-64-3. 225 Pages.

http://www.col.org/PublicationDocuments/pub_Mobile%20Learning_web.pdf

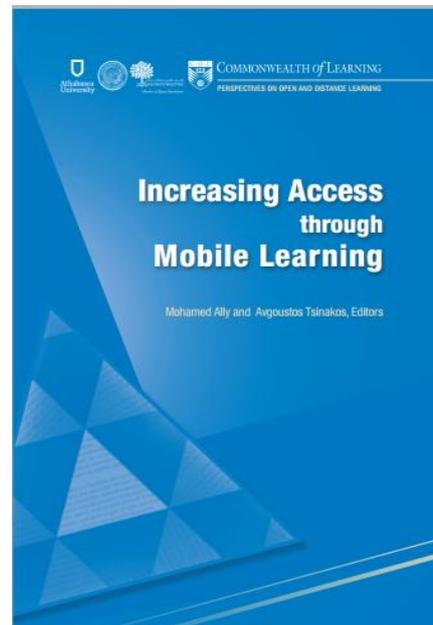
Mobile technology has captured the imagination of the people because of its high utility in all spheres of everyday life. “With more than half a million apps now available, the use of a mobile device are limited mainly only by the imagination of its creators” (McGreal, p-52). And so, the book “Increasing Access through Mobile Learning” is rightly timed to help academicians and policy makers understand the technicalities as well as utility of mLearning.

Even though still in its embryonic stage (Crompton, p-7), mLearning is evolving fast. Itself being evolved from eLearning, it’s transition from the vision of Alan Kay’s Dynabook to today’s hand held mobile phones has been described in interesting detail by the author. mLearning evolution currently reached a standardized Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM).

As discussed by Park (p – 30), portability is one of the most distinctive technological features of mobile phones which have made it an integral part of learning. But then again, in cases where the learners are not well versed in Web 2.0 technologies, "transactional distance" or psychological distance between learners and instructors has become wide and pose real problems to learning. These discussions offer new insights for

anyone involved in developing course content or designing courses for mLearning. In case of educational institutions, the m-Library at Athabasca University can be a reference point as well as a good example for mobile learning initiatives by educational institutions. Also, mobile phones being the major source of internet access across the globe, mLibrary as part of mLearning can be an important source of information for academicians around the world providing organized and credible knowledge resource to them.

Other important issues in mobile learning, Open Educational Resources (OER), Digital Rights Management (DRM) (p - 52) and Geographical Constraints (p – 56) have been



discussed in depth by McGreal and is another very important aspect of consideration in designing global content because of the variety of devices available across geographical boundaries and their unique software and hardware specifications.

The Ambient Information Channel (AICHE) Model, described by Specht (p – 61), provides location specific and need based information and is gaining importance to make learning and interaction more user-specific. MASELTOV project (Mobile Assistance for Social Inclusion and Empowerment of Immigrants with Persuasive Learning Technologies and Social Network Services) is a good example which provided learning opportunities to immigrants and helped in their social inclusion. Credit goes to the author for the detailed and clear description of this project.



In the implementation aspect, there are several factors that determine the suitability and accessibility of the content to the users. Specificity of mobile platform, using of web apps, offline or online modes have their own share of positive and negatives in mLearning and the authors have presented a rich discussion of this. Also, Bring Your Own device (BYOD) can be a huge source of knowledge for learners in the rural parts of the world, especially in the developing world where majority of the mobile subscriptions are (p - 255). But the discussion was mostly concentrated on designs assuming the users' needs are known rather than making them user-centric with actual user participation. This might make mLearning more effective for all users across the globe. And while there are many operating systems that support eLearning, mLearning becomes a bit more complicated with its keywords being contextuality, mobility and portability.

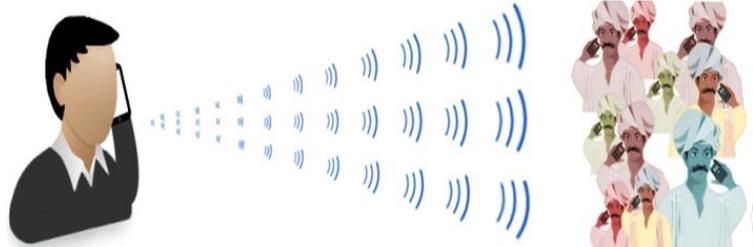
Since mobile users are more or less "randomly online" (Glahn, p - 146), synchronization of data needs to be an important feature in mLearning. Some interesting cases of mLearning has been noted by the author the focus being mainly on location-based learning. The models described can be important reference point for further development of mLearning OSs.

The orchestrated mLearning experiment described by Looyi and Toh (p – 161) is a good example of the importance of instructional design and thorough planning for mLearning. In higher education too, mLearning has an important place. Providing increased access to education is easier virtually than physically and a number of initiatives have already been taken by prestigious universities around the world. But again, what is missing in these discussions is the shared use of mobile devices in both schools and families in developing countries. This being a common phenomenon in developing countries, a discussion on how mLearning is addressed in such scenarios would have been very enriching.

In professional setting too, mLearning is of much importance, as the employees are more likely to use their mobiles rather than PCs to connect to other employees and

individuals. To understand the utility of mLearning in the context of the grassroots level learning in developing country setting, the mobile based farm advisory services provided in India could have been explored in detail. But most of the mLearning initiatives are based on the notion that the learners are all 'digital natives' which is not always the case. And even if not within the very scope of discussion, but in such situation, how the issue is addressed would have presented a very good guideline for developing countries.

The cases discussed by Venkataraman Balaji and T.V. Prabhakar focuses on real-time information and a database that builds-up as we go and presents an interesting read in the context of a developing nation. The discussions also presents the real impact of mLearning in the life



and livelihood of the poorest of the society. An interesting sum-up of mobile learning by Parsons (p – 217) at the end of the book takes the readers through the important aspects of mLearning. mLearning has its own pros and cons and to overcome the cons and take full advantage of its pros, there needs to be a clear-cut understanding of the end results and developing plans to meet these.

Mobile learning is at present in its infancy and so the book can be an important guide for the M4D enthusiasts. It gives a good account of the technologies available and the initiatives undertaken in mLearning across the globe. It should be noted however that while developed countries are more strategically placed in terms of infrastructure available to take full advantage of mLearning it is the developing countries which are major subscribers of mobile phones. As mobiles have a huge potential in upgrading the life and livelihoods of rural communities in developing countries, some discussion on the mLearning initiatives or the lack of these in such settings would have been provided in the book. Nonetheless, with a sequential arrangement of the chapters in design, implementation and use, the book is a pleasant read and also makes it a ready reference for academicians, policy makers and all those who are interested in mLearning.

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