

Book review

Ally, M. (ed.)(2009) *Mobile learning. Transforming the delivery of education and training*. Athabasca, Alberta: AU Press.

In an address to the United Nations on 25 September 2008, Carl-Henric Svanberg, the CEO of Ericsson stated 'Today there are more than 3.7 billion mobile subscriptions around the world. In a few years we will pass 5 billion. 90% of new growth will come from emerging economies.'

One has to respect the research of Svanberg's advisers but to achieve his statistics of 5 billion mobile devices for a world population of 6.5 billion, nearly every person in Africa and Asia would need to possess one.

There is an old adage in distance education research which states that 'it is not technologies with inherent pedagogical qualities which succeed in distance education but technologies that are generally available to citizens'.

What is clear is that never in the history of the use of technology in education has there been as technology as available to citizens as mobile telephony. One can safely conclude that every student in every higher and further education institution in very country in the European Union possess one. They use these sophisticated communications devices constantly in every walk of life – except their education.

It is well known that all the Ministries of Education and of Higher Education in the EU spend vast sums of euros annually on the purchase of educational technology for their schools, colleges and universities. Here, for the first time in history, is a technology that will cost the Ministries of Education nothing, because the students own the technology to be used.

It is the role of the field of mobile learning to harness this unprecedented availability of technology to education and training.

Ally, in his introduction to this book, responds with enthusiasm to these issues. He writes 'As the citizens of the world use mobile technology to complete everyday tasks they will demand access to learning material using mobile technology...Hence, education and training have no other choice but to deliver learning materials on mobile devices'.

In this context Ally's book is to be welcomed. The literature of the field of mobile learning is unacceptably fragile. Many other initiatives like his are needed. For mobile learning to enter into the mainstream of educational provision, courses on

mobile devices need to be presented by universities throughout the world. Before accepting a course in a new sector of provision, like mobile learning, any Dean of a Faculty will ask to see the literature of the field. Ally's book will bolster the literature available.

The weaknesses of Ally's book stem from its multi-authored nature. It is acknowledged that most books on new fields, like mobile learning, are in the first instance multi-authored but this only emphasizes the fragility of the field. It can be claimed that a field has not begun to establish itself until it has been the subject of a study by a single author. This reviewer knows of only one study in the field of mobile learning by a single author, a short monograph by Metcalf from the University of Central Florida.

As is common in the fields of education and training, Ally does not attempt to justify his list of authors. As is the case with very many volumes in the field of education one wonders are the authors supposed to be leaders in the field, or persons who presented papers at a conference that were then edited together and published or just friends or acquaintances of the editor, who happened to have a chapter available, and were therefore chosen for inclusion. In this volume a number of the authors chosen have not published extensively in the field in the judgment of this reviewer.

The authors come from the United Kingdom, Canada, Norway, Australia, Italy, South Africa and Finland. Does this indicate that these countries are leaders in the field of mobile learning? The list differs from the 187-page study of mobile learning in the world and the 306-page study of mobile learning in the 27 EU states edited by this writer and published at:
http://www.ericsson.com/ericsson/corpinformo/programs/the_role_of_mobile_learning_in_european_education/products.shtml.

Of the 13 chapters two are from the Open University of the United Kingdom, two are from Athabasca University, three are from leading British universities, the University of Birmingham, London Metropolitan University and the University of Bristol and two have South African joint-authors. There are three worrying features about the book that need to be underlined: prepublication, currency of references and sample size. Three of the 13 chapters have been published before, all in the online journal *IRRODL*, which is also published by Athabasca University. Although the book is published in 2009, many of the references in the chapters are not current. In three instances the last reference is to 2005, in 5 cases it is to 2006 and in a further 5 cases to 2007. In a field which is changing with the rapidity of wireless technologies this is disturbing. Many of the chapters make reference to the testing of products with students. But the numbers of those involved in the testing is unacceptably small, sometimes less than ten.

Clough et al. from the Open University of the United Kingdom contribute a chapter *Informal learning evidence in online communities of mobile device*

enthusiasts which studies how users of PDAs and smartphones study in informal situations. The results of the analysis suggest that these users used their devices to support a wide range of informal learning activities both intentional and unintentional due to the portability, storage capacity, computing power and convenience of the devices. The number of respondents to the survey was 150, all references except one were pre-2006 and the authors remark that many of their respondents do not have camera-phones or GPS. One might have thought that the editor would have preferred a chapter on mobile learning in mainline education rather than in informal learning.

Kukulska-Hulme and Pettit, also of the Open University, provide a chapter with the title *Practitioners as innovators: emergent practice in personal mobile learning, learning work and leisure*. The chapter presents research into personal mobile device usage by students of the OU's well-known M.A. in Open and Distance Learning in five types of activity: teaching, learning, work, social interaction and entertainment. A questionnaire was developed and sent to 150 students and there were 57 respondents. The chapter states that it is dealing with events in 2005. Basically this is a report on a research activity which draws few conclusions for the field of mobile learning as a whole.

Bradley, Haynes, Cook, Boyle and Smith from London Metropolitan University, probably the UK's leading user of mobile learning, present a chapter with the title *Design and development of multimedia learning objects for mobile phones*. This is an excellent presentation of how London Metropolitan University adapted its portfolio of Reusable Learning Objects (RLOs) for e-learning to Mobile Learning Objects (MLOs) for mobile learning. A precise and detailed description is given of how the university used Flash Lite (a wireless version of Flash) and developed four prototypes in the process of producing the MLOs, with detailed description of the pedagogical and design decisions made. Since the publication of this chapter, London Metropolitan University, led especially by Cook and Smith, have used GPS, RFID, mediascapes and QR codes to produce location-based and context-sensitive mobile learning courseware. This pushes the fields of education and training into areas which the traditional sectors of provision, face-to-face classes, distance education and e-learning, cannot do or cannot do as well as mobile learning.

Naismith and Smith from the University of Birmingham present *Using mobile technologies for multimedia tours in a traditional museum setting*. Mobile learning has great possibilities for tours of art galleries or museums or botanical gardens or tours of historic sites and picturesque areas in which desktop computers would be impossible and laptops would be out of place. The chapter describes a project for using Flash on Pocket PCs for a tour of the Lapworth Museum of Geology in Birmingham, England. The authors report that it is feasible and desirable to use mobile technology in museums without compromising the aesthetic appeal of the museum. They state that the results of the study exceeded expectations in terms of the benefits of mobile technology for both museum staff and visitors.

The concluding chapter is on the *Use of mobile technology for teacher training* by Wishart of the University of Bristol. This is a study of the use of PDAs (Personal Digital Assistants) in a British secondary school by trainee teachers. In the early days of mobile learning it was acceptable that many of the experiences with mobile learning reported at international conferences and in journal articles were with PDAs and not with mobile phones. PDAs had larger screens, more functionality and were easier to work with than mobile phones. But the statistics quoted from Svanberg at the start of this review are for mobile phones and not for PDAs. The statistics for PDAs are in the millions and sales are not increasing because smartphones are encroaching on their area. Therefore if the field of mobile learning is to progress research must be focused on mobile phones and smartphones. The awkwardness of small screens and data input on mobile phones has to be addressed and solved because the definition of devices for mobile learning will always be 'a device that a lady can carry in a handbag and a gentleman in his pocket'. Wishart is a respected researcher in this field but she is not well served by the choice of this article for the book because its sample sizes are too small to be of importance.

The field of wireless technologies is developing with amazing rapidity; it is important that the field of the use of wireless technologies in education should not be left behind. The literature of the field needs development. Activities with some similarity to mobile learning, like news feeds, sports feeds, weather feeds are now commonplace in many countries of the world. The recent appearance of the iPhone, and the reactions to it by companies like Nokia and Samsung, to mention only two, have provided mobile learning with devices and applications that should guarantee a successful future for the field.

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