The London Mobile Learning Group socio-cultural ecological approach to mobile learning: an overview

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Abstract

Mobile learning is an emerging, and rapidly expanding field of educational research and practice across schools, colleges and universities as well as in the work place. The London M-learning Group brings together an international, interdisciplinary group of researchers from the fields of cultural studies, sociology, semiotics, pedagogy and educational technology from the Institute of Education, the University of Kassel, the London Metropolitan University and the University of Verona. The group is working on a theoretical and conceptual framework for mobile learning around the notion of cultural ecology which is outlined in this paper. The analytical engagement with mobile learning of the group takes the shape of a conceptual model in which educational uses of mobile technologies are viewed in ecological terms as part of a cultural and pedagogical context in transformation. Members of the group work on various projects and publications with each other, and organise joint events.

Overview

In view of the increasing portability and functional convergence of technological devices, as well as the reduction in their cost, and the cost of services available for them, mobile devices have become more and more embedded in the life-worlds of users. It is the growing significance of mobile devices in learners' everyday lives, i.e. their ubiquity and personal ownership of them, as well as their increasing use for what is traditionally called 'informal learning' that motivates our interest in them.

We are concerned about the dangers of a failure of the education system to keep pace with the developments in the life-worlds of young people and society more widely and argue the need for a purposeful 'push' in approaches to mobile learning in all sectors of education in order to avoid a potential disconnection between the way young people operate in their daily lives and the way educational institutions interact with them. Educators in all phases are having to face up to the challenges posed by mobile learning and its integration in their professional practice and we are hope to be able to make a meaningful contribution to understanding the complex processes involved and possible ways forward through our work.

Mobile learning – as we understand it – is not about delivering content to mobile devices but, instead, about the processes of coming to know and being able to operate successfully in and across new and ever changing contexts and learning spaces. And, it is about understanding and knowing how to utilise our everyday life worlds as learning spaces.

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Our ecological approach attempts to provide a conceptual framework for an educational response to current social and economic trends in a world marked by fluidity, provisionality and instability, where responsibilities for meaning-making as well as other risk taking are firmly located with the individual. It also attempts to take into account current changes in the authority over education from state to the market, changes to consumption and production as well as current characteristics of the media landscape like participation, distribution, local and global content, ubiquity and multimodality. (Kress, 2008)

We see a very close connection between meaning-making and learning, in semiotic terms between the making of signs and the making of concepts. For us, both are the result of semiotic work: that is, purposive work with meaning resources (Kress and Pachler, 2007).

In the main, the following aspects characterize our proposals for an ecological approach (see Figure 1):

- agency: young people can be seen to increasingly display a new habitus of learning in which they constantly see their life-worlds framed both as a challenge and as an environment and a potential resource for learning, in which their expertise is individually appropriated in relation to personal definitions of relevance and in which the world has become the curriculum populated by mobile device users in a constant state of expectancy and contingency (Kress and Pachler, 2007);

- cultural practices: mobile devices are increasingly used for social interaction, communication and sharing; learning is viewed as culturally situated meaning-making inside and outside of educational institutions and media use in everyday life have achieved cultural significance;

- structures: young people increasingly live in a society of individualized risks, new social stratifications, individualized mobile mass communication and highly complex and proliferated technological infrastructure; their learning is significantly governed by the curricular frames of educational institutions with specific approaches towards the use of new cultural resources for learning.

Figure 1: Key components of a socio-cultural ecological approach to mobile learning – a typology

We see learning using mobile devices governed by a triangular relationship between socio-cultural structures, cultural practices and the agency of media users / learners, represented in the three branches in Figure 1. The interrelationship of these three components: agency, the user's capacity to act on the world, cultural practices, the routines users engage in in their everyday lives, and the socio-cultural and technological structures that govern their being in the world, we see as an ecology which in turn manifests itself in the form of an emerging cultural transformation.

The diagram in Figure 1 is deliberately non-hierarchical, i.e. it can be read clockwise or anticlockwise and each one of the three branches of the concept map can be read first. It seems important to us that none of the domains is dominant over the other, and that their relative importance is determined by the specific context in which the model is used.

Invariably, there is insufficient space here to represent and discuss each of the sub-branches of the concept map in any detail. For a fuller discussion see Pachler, Cook and Bachmair, forthcoming and Pachler, Bachmair, Cook and Kress, forthcoming.

References

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