Teaching Adults with Mobile Learning

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Mobile devices are commonplace in many societies worldwide. If you are unsure of how to do a home task like replacing a lightbulb, you can use your mobile device to search for a video tutorial. This shift from reading a how-to book to doing a Web search on your smartphone makes mobile devices an ideal platform for learning. Mobile learning or m-learning can be considered a subcategory of distance learning, which involves learners being at a distance from the instructors. Distance learning can be a good fit for self-directed learners who are able to take initiative in tasks. Galbraith states that "self-directed learners can use the vast resources available online or through interactive instruction to meet learning objectives", (2004, p. 279). I agree with Galbraith and believe that mobile learning should be the primary way to teach adults because it is flexible, engaging, and customizable.

One definition of m-learning is "the use of mobile technology to aid in the learning, reference or exploration of information useful to an individual at that moment or in a specific use context" (Feser, 2010). Although m-learning and e-learning are sometimes used interchangeably, there are differences between the two. E-learning refers to content offered electronically, usually via a desktop computer. The learner is expected to sit through a specific time duration of training material. M-learning is mobile, so the content is available 24/7 and usually in smaller segments than e-learning. The goal of e-learning is to provide information that will be retained and used at a later time. The goal of m-learning is immediate use of the information, since it can be accessed on demand. Lastly, e-learning assessments may take longer due to the actions of the learner taking place days or even months after the e-learning is completed. Assessments for m-learning however, can be expedited since the actions of the learner usually take place immediately after the m-learning (Feser, 2010).

Murphy (2016) cites a 2015 McGraw-Hill study that found 81% of surveyed college students used mobile devices for studying and that study time was increasing with this usage. There are numerous applications available to help a college student; from task management to PDF viewers to streaming music specifically for studying, there is something for everyone. A couple years ago, I was in a course at a community college. The professor had their contact information and the first assignment written out on the whiteboard. While I was busy writing all this down in my notebook, my younger classmates were simply taking a photo of the whiteboard with their smartphones. At that moment I realized they were being much more efficient than me!

M-learning is also finding its place in the lifelong learning arena. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2006) state that lifelong learning refers to a concept that benefits both the individual and society by making learning accessible to all. Lifelong learning takes into account that learning takes place in both formal education structures as well as informal learning opportunities. Lifelong learning can be a means to increasing workforce skills that eventually impacts local economic growth. One example of this is a 2010 lifelong learning study in India that used mobile phones as a business and learning tool to help women overcome poverty. The women received microloans for goat or sheep herding and the mobile phones were used to deliver training via 60 second audio messages covering a range of business topics. The women also used the mobile phones to learn from each other through sharing their experiences. (Balasubramanian, Thamizoli, Umar, & Kanwar, 2010). This study illustrated how mobile learning in an informal setting can incorporate both self-directed learning and collaborative learning.

Another example of self-directed learning in informal settings is an adult doing an Internet web search for a personal medical condition. Websites such as WebMD have become

the first stop for many people when they have an ailment, before making an appointment with their doctor. M-learning provides a way to look up this information immediately.

As mobile technology grows in formal education and informal learning, the business sector is also realizing the value of m-learning. Kahle-Piasecki, Chao, and Ariss (2012) cite several benefits of m-learning including cost-effectiveness by reducing travel for training events, the ability to reach greater numbers of employees, and giving employees more schedule flexibility to get training and resources. Companies are moving towards m-learning to keep costs down. A face-to-face training event can be quite costly, from renting the conference rooms and audio visual equipment to travel expenses for the trainers and trainees and even the costs of printed materials adds up. M-learning saves money by making training available anytime anywhere. The materials are typically all accessed online with an Internet connection, but they can also be designed to be downloaded to a device and accessed in areas without Wi-Fi connections.

The flexibility of m-learning is one the of main benefits for adults. Galbraith states that children usually have the main role of learner, but adults can have other roles such as worker or parent that take precedence over the learner role (2004, p. 35). This conflict of roles requires teachers of adults to recognize that many adults must juggle priorities daily, so learning schedules that are flexible are ideal. Some leaners may find it easier to squeeze in short segments of content rather than sitting through a two-hour lecture in the evening after a full-day of work.

In a 2013 study, the National Center for Biotechnology Information, found that humans have an average attention span of only 8 seconds (Donahue, 2016, p.27). This implies that the future of instructional design is in microlearning. Microlearning refers to small chunks of

learning that can be consumed "just in time" (Donahue, 2016, p. 27). A couple examples of microlearning are viewing video clips or reading blog posts.

Microlearning is particularly successful for workplace training. Some of the advantages of microlearning are personalized learning, accelerated employee development, and engaged employees. Microlearning allows a learner to consume content specific to their needs and skills instead of sitting through an entire general training course (Fox, 2016). Employee development can be accelerated with microlearning by providing various learning styles for employees that are available on demand. The flexibility of watching a 5-minute video clip is great for employees who do a lot of travel. When training opportunities are readily available, employees are often more engaged in their work and employee retention goes up (Fox, 2016).

Smartphone and tablet apps have brought electronic games to the masses. The lines between work and play are becoming blurred as businesses are utilizing games to train their employees and inform their clients. Zinger (2014) describes gamification as "the use of game thinking and game mechanics attached to work" (p. 32). Gamification is a trend that human resources (HR) professionals are finding to be successful as a training tool.

M-learning and gamification are already on the rise in HR departments. According to a 2013 study by the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD), 25% of HR executives used structural gamification in a training program, and 19% of executives used serious game simulations to reinforce skills or practice tasks, and 56% of respondents said they would be using gaming in HR applications (Roberts, 2014). Although games are fun, the real theory behind using them is to increase engagement in learning. One successful example is a game-based onboarding program used by eVault, a data storage and recovery company. The game was accessed on a company tablet and took 30 hours to complete within the first two

weeks of starting the job. The program included multimedia, interactions with other employees, and a quiz to gage information retention. The program got rave reviews from employees who found it efficient, engaging, and fun. This is the type of onboarding that would make me excited to join a company and feel welcome and part of a team.

Another success story is that of NTT Data, an IT services and consulting company. They used gamification in their leadership development program. The content included videos, readings, puzzles and scenario-based quizzes. 700 of 7000 employees completed the program in 2012. 50 of the 700 took on team lead roles, which is a 50% increase from traditional leadership programs. The new team leaders generated 30 new ideas resulting in $1 million in new revenues for the company (Roberts, 2014). These results are in favor of gamification as a non-traditional learning platform.

When compared to traditional learning platforms, m-learning and gamification are easily customizable. Murphy states that “students can customize an m-learning study program that works best for their unique learning style and thus increase the chances of success in passing exams or obtaining professional certifications” (2016). A traditional training course might only have a lecture, whereas content created for m-learning can be more interactive. M-learning also allows for different ways to reinforce content, such as a video clip followed by an interactive exercise and then collaboration and discussion with peers through a social media type format. Although creating a lot of content can be costly, there can be savings through the use of reusable learning objects (RLO’s). The short nature of RLO’s makes them ideal for being used in multiple courses, for example a video clip on company mission and values can be reused in training for various company topics.

In conclusion, m-learning is an ideal platform for adult learning. It is flexible, engaging, and customizable. M-learning is ideal for adult students who prefer flexible schedules to help with school, work, and life balance. Although critics of mobile device usage in the classroom are worried about distractions, there are many positive ways to use mobile devices to promote learning. Mobile collaborative apps can draw out instant text responses from even the shyest students. Also due to the mobile nature of m-learning there are many opportunities to take learning out of the classroom and turn everyday moments into teachable moments.

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