Mobile Learning: Perspectives on Practice and Policy

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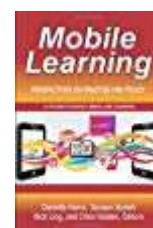
Title: Mobile Learning: Perspectives on Practice and Policy
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Publisher: Information Age Publishing, Charlotte
ISBN: 1641131225, **Pages:** 290, **Year:** 2018
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Making predictions about the role a given technology will play in our lives is difficult. Would it have been possible, for instance, to a prognosticator a hundred or so years ago, seeing the first automobile, to predict that this technology would one day provide employment to hundreds of thousands of people across the world while, at the same time, leading to urban sprawl, traffic jams, pollution, and wars in the Middle East? Clearly, our predictions need to be tinged with a touch of humility.

This humility is as essential when we consider technologies that have been predicted to transform education and learning. One of the most significant technologies today is the mobile device, which has transformed many aspects of our lives. In fact, a recent UNESCO report suggests that more than six billion people have some form of access to a working mobile device—more, as it turns out, than have access to toilets and drinkable water.

Mobile Learning: Perspectives on Practice and Policy is a collection of articles on research and practice around mobile technologies and their implications for education. In an attempt to process the rapid growth of mobile technologies, Herro, Arafeh, Ling, and Holden have garnered perspectives from a range of academics and practicing educators, addressing issues of access, professional development, digital citizenship, corporate involvement in education, and mobility.

The book is divided into three parts, each consisting of four chapters, focusing on policy, community, and pre-K-12 contexts. The arguments for using the mobile device in the classroom come with a hint of optimism, as contributors note its potential to provide opportunities for students to explore, share, and learn. Additionally, the capacities of the mobile device to bring social change, to reach beyond local contexts, and to represent marginalized voices are highlighted as well. The use of a technology that allows exploration of a potentially infinite range of possibilities and opportunities is emphasized as a natural part of human discovery and expression.

Not everything discussed is optimistic, however, though the concerns, insofar as they are described, emerge from a sense of minor apprehension, highlighting the fact that mobile technologies are not a silver bullet to solve all educational problems. In this context, the authors address some of the problems that mobile and digital technologies can create, such as inequality of access and corporate involvement in schools. In the sections below, we provide a brief description of the chapters, followed by a more critical look at the volume overall.

In Part 1, Chapter One, Dunkerly-Bean, Crompton, and Moffit tackle the impact of globalization on local literacies and practices, addressing concerns about a form of digital colonization through the spread of literacies of the Global North that may marginalize local literacies, especially in the Global South. Although the authors call for a balance between the global and local, the potential for mobile devices to create more problems than they solve looms over the implications. In the next chapter, Kolb addresses the challenge of professional development with and for mobile devices, noting the biggest hurdles to using mobile technologies in K-12 classrooms as: lack of teacher buy-in, lack of technological support for teachers, low out-of-school access for students, and the need for digital and media literacy. In Chapter Three, Parsons and MacCallum draw on global and local policies to highlight core themes and competencies that are considered crucial for students and teachers. Citing global policies, they center their argument for integration on the need to improve access. This theme is continued in the next chapter, where Arafeh, Kuszpa, Weller, and Mitchell focus on the significance of mobile devices for representation, engagement, inquiry, and socialization. Studying tween mobile use, they weave a cautionary tale, calling for teachers to spearhead digital literacy and competency for the sake of student safety on the internet.

The four chapters in Part 2 focus on connecting history and community via location-based mobile learning. The authors in this section emphasize the potential for mobile devices to create engaging and immersive learning experiences that afford the ability to share new and alternate narratives. In Chapter Five, Larsen, Asbell-Clarke, MacEachern, and Rowe focus on location-based gaming applications in an attempt to counter one of the side-effects of digital devices, that of inducing youth to spend time indoors. In the next chapter, Rish, Cun, Gloss, and Pamuk note how geolocation can advance community inquiry and learning about local issues. Along these lines, in Chapter Seven, Voel and Perry discuss supporting 21st-century learning skills with the help of game design. Similarly, Chapter Eight, written by Gillespie, discusses using game design to create augmented reality experiences that can be tied with national historical parks.

The four chapters in Part 3 focus on the role of mobile devices in learning in pre-K-12 contexts. Deaton, Linder, and Deaton, the authors of the first chapter in this section, discuss the importance of shaping professional development around mobile devices in terms of inquiry and problem-based approaches. In Chapter Ten, Motter emphasizes the power of mobile devices to connect rural schools, within the context of national and global citizenship. The authors also remind us that mobility, which is often taken for granted, can save resources and money by offering ready-to-use, ad hoc solutions to some recurring problems like information sharing. This is followed by a chapter by Ozyer, Roberts, and Wilson, who discuss what mobility and internet access can do to and for art education, especially in a context dominated by standardized testing. The authors share examples from a BYOD application in an art classroom that offered students a more equitable space to create in a relaxed environment while being intellectually and creatively challenged. Finally, Gottlieb, in one of the few chapters to address this issue, focuses on the kinds of ethical concerns that emerge due to the involvement of corporations in technology for education. The chapter offers practice-based solutions to consumer

ignorance, arguing for the integration of self-reflexivity into the classroom discourse.

This collection of articles, overall, provides a snapshot of current uses of mobile devices for learning and provides some pointers for the future. However, as important as what these articles cover is what they *do not* cover or discuss. Missing from the discussion are the ways our recent history has provided a profoundly warning about how these devices—which have penetrated almost every aspect of our lives and every corner of the planet—can cause deep social harm. One does not have to go far to find examples; they are in the news every day. These range from Twitter bots that exacerbate social divisions to fake news, from Facebook facilitating genocide of the Rohingya in Myanmar to the rampant misuse of private data by multinational corporations.

This is not surprising since as educators we often focus on the relatively narrow domain of learning within specific classroom or school situations, ignoring the broader social and technological context within which these devices function. It is rare to consider, for instance, the manner in which these mobile devices, and the apps that run on them, have been *intentionally designed* to exploit our minds' weaknesses. As Tristan Harris, design ethicist, writes, these devices and the software that run on them "play your psychological vulnerabilities (consciously and unconsciously) against you in the race to grab your attention."

Moreover, this deceptive use of persuasion techniques can now be combined with immense amounts of highly granular user data and personal information, all of which are in the control of multi-national corporations that may not have the same benign motivations that guide us as educators. It is no surprise that many of these tools are offered free of cost to users and educational institutions. We need to understand that through this process we are willingly trading our private information for convenience. This is a Faustian bargain at the core of which is the idea that "if you are not paying for something, you are not the customer, but the product." Thus, schools that use free software or services from Google or Pearson or other multinationals need to understand that we are helping these corporations to build an enormous database filled with our students' information and preferences that will be tracked and monitored for the foreseeable future.

There is a long (and troubling) history of how new technologies have been used to manipulate and control, particularly in relation to historically marginalized and powerless groups. Many of our students fall in the former category and almost all fall in the latter. This is not to suggest that we not use these products but rather that we approach these tools and technologies with a healthy, critical skepticism and an awareness of history.

It can be argued that it is unfair to criticize the authors and editors of this particular collection as not addressing all of these issues. We all work within the boundaries defined by our disciplines, guided by existing incentive structures. That, we argue, may be part of the problem. The educational technology research field has often been overly focused on evaluating "learning outcomes" (however they may be defined) in specific, often narrowly defined contexts, often driven by a somewhat rose-tinted, optimistic worldview of the positive impact of technology. We as scholars, researchers, and educators need to go beyond providing mere rhetorical caution but rather be at the center of the debate, whether the discussion be specifically on the role of mobile learning or broadly about educational technology. As Stephen Jay Gould wrote, while describing the complicated history of scientific representation, "We are most revealed in what we do not scrutinize."