

Journalist, citizen and learner?—A consideration of context in learning mobile journalism through mobile learning

By Dr Bernhard Gross
University of the West of England
Bernhard.gross@uwe.ac.uk

This paper considers some generic key factors in undergraduate students' mobile learning experience in relation to the teaching and learning of mobile/smartphone journalism. The paper will raise issues related to boundaries of learning, trend (iii) of the Ideas for Mobile Learning Symposium, through a consideration of generic contextual factors influencing the mobile learning situation and the tension arising of mutually contradictory aspects. It raises questions about how potentially contradictory fields of practice (Bourdieu, 1992) influence the specific learner generated learning context. The paper highlights some concerns about risk in the mobile learning context resulting from this dynamic. This paper represents a research in progress report.

Background: Mobile technology in journalism

In the context of the practice of journalistic production mobile technology is becoming increasingly influential. Smart phones in particular have moved from a device used by non-professionals, who decide to capture images or audio of something newsworthy that they happen to encounter, to a first-choice, default newsgathering and production tool for professional journalists. Due to this development, the introduction of a mobile technology strand into the journalism curriculum represents more than a mobile teaching and learning strategy to achieve other learning outcomes but the ability to use mobile technology journalistically represents a key learning outcome in itself.

Learning mobile journalism through mobile learning

At the outset of the academic year 2013/14, 32 second year undergraduate half-award journalism students on the module were asked to respond to a baseline survey. The survey assessed what devices, data allowances etc. students owned as well as attitudes and existing behaviours towards using their devices in quasi-journalistic ways and their perception of how well they understood regulatory and risk factors relevant to a specific situation of using their devices. On the latter aspects students will be able to report back in a second survey at the end of the academic year 2013/14.

In between, over the course of two semesters the students respond to a series of tasks, of increasing technical and journalistic sophistication, basically moving from scrapbooking, i.e., using their phone to take a picture or record a brief reminder, to newsgathering, i.e., collecting material that could be used in a journalistic product, to news production, i.e., completing a journalistic product. Students use their own devices and post their responses on a personal blog on Blackboard, the university's virtual learning environment. This very incremental approach and the use of personal devices are necessary as, though most students' devices have the technical capability; most students do not use them in this way. At the same time the various operating systems and applications on the market operate differently. While teaching staff can advise and make some suggestions, it is not possible to provide one-size-fits-all training sessions on the operation of devices nor can the university provide the students with such devices for the duration of the academic year. This allows them to become

familiar with the processes of their device. The assignment is part of a portfolio of journalistic products assessment element. The blog entries are only assessed for completion in relation to the brief not for quality.

The surveys and exercises highlight some of the generic contextual tensions as well as the pushing of boundaries inherent in the specific situations of mobile learning generated here. Students become potential 24/7 students. Student-related activities are no longer restricted to the classroom or a specific fieldwork time-window. In the context of teaching mobile journalism, mobile learning situations can arise at any moment. Transferring behaviours, e.g., taking pictures of people acceptable in a social setting, when out with friends, into a quasi-professional context *and* learning context, e.g., taking pictures of members of the public engaged or involved in a newsworthy event, to which different formal and informal rules apply. The latter two themselves stand in some tension. A consideration of the university's duty of care may result in a rather different evaluation of acceptable risk than evaluating the situation either along journalistic rules and regulations or if students were acting as non-student witnesses only, i.e., not in their capacity as students but only as any other passer-by/citizen witnessing something. This is particularly important, as the preliminary findings from the first survey compared to students' understanding of risk and regulatory factors display in the classroom, suggest an overestimation of their ability to understand the impact these aspects have.

Bourdieu, P. 1992. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.