

Traxler, J. (2014) Paper presented at the Bristol Ideas in Mobile Learning 2014 Symposium, Bristol.

# Mobile Learning in the Global South

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Learning with mobiles seems to have obvious advantages as an educational technology in what is often called the 'developing world' or the 'global South' and there is indeed currently a lot of activity and interest. This does however often seem to be informed by inappropriate theorising or by none at all. The purpose of this paper is to encourage the mobile learning research community to theorise critically about 'development' issues and make tentative steps towards recognising and incorporating some of the theoretical work of the development studies community into more appropriate forms of mobile learning for the global South. In many senses this is at the boundaries of mobile learning. The paper draws on a book chapter containing full references and attempts to outline a new research agenda.

## The Introductory Dilemma

There are two ways of tackling disadvantage in the 'developing' world, in the global South. Firstly to treat it as merely a dimension of disadvantage, comparable to gender inequality or economic deprivation and the second is to recognise it as something distinct and different. The choice has implications for the development of any conceptual or analytic framework. This paper takes the second approach in order to explore the possibilities of generating new theoretical approaches at the broad intersection of mobile learning with development studies.

## The Current Context – Agencies and Donors

Owing to the dramatic increase in mobile use, ownership and familiarity in the US and the emergence of sustainable business models around some aspects of mobile learning, it is no surprise that much of the aid, donor and agency community, the World Bank, UNESCO or USAID for example, staffed by US nationals or headquartered in the US, suddenly saw mobiles as the obvious delivery technology for their educational objectives in the global South in the recent past. Their over-riding emphases on scale, sustainability and content with or around a largely US perspective on mobile learning make it imperative to develop rigorous and appropriate theory.

## Some Historical Context – Early in East Africa

Here we discuss some early projects in order to illustrate how concepts and practices, taken-for-granted or not-worth-mentioning along with the unexpected consequences and hidden causes, and the role of anecdote in the development of theory.

## **More Context – Later in Africa and India**

Here we look at some well-known and well-documented projects, partly for the added richness of more detail and partly to see how such projects are presented and how the understandings of the wider community are constructed.

## **Interface, Language and Culture**

Many parts of the global South exhibit complex ecologies of language where individuals must use, negotiate and evaluate the relationships between mother tongues, lingua franca, national languages and global power languages. For marginal or indigenous peoples this is especially problematic and their relations with education and technology are problematic and political. For any peoples living in such an environment the intrusion of mobile technology is potentially a profound perturbation.

## **Mobiles and Literacy**

In the historically literate and culturally resilient global North, the interactions of literacy and mobiles are subtle, complex and well documented and literacy itself rests on universal primary education systems that generally date back to the mid-nineteenth century. In many parts of the global South none of these assumptions can be taken for granted and universal primary education and the literacy that goes with it are still Millennium Development Goals unlikely to be met by the target date of 2015. The interactions of mobiles and literacy are complex but this literacy is a pre-requisite for more advanced mobile learning.

## **Technology Impact**

The details of technology have an impact on all aspects of language and communication. Here we look at the impact of the interfaces on language and expression, using some apparently trivial examples to illustrate the potentially pervasive impact of mobile technology on interaction and language, both of which are fundamental to any subsequent learning with mobiles.

## **Digital Literacy**

The notion of digital literacy is widely understood albeit strongly contested in UK universities and European TEL but the possibility of learning with mobiles in the global South raises several new issues. One is the nature of the subset, if any, of digital literacy that might be called mobile digital literacy, another, given the presumed relationship between literacy and digital literacy, is nature of digital literacy in societies that might be oral, pre-literate or post-literate, another is the inflection of digital literacy in societies where the only digital technology is mobile (and in fact these societies are newly digital) and finally the nature of digital literacy in societies where the languages underpinning literacy are a complex and fluid ecosystem. These issues are closely inter-related and separating is largely a device to facilitate discussion and analysis.

## **Theorising Development**

We are looking for some engagement or synthesis of mobile learning, an essentially Northern enterprise, with the theoretical frameworks of development studies in the hope of moving towards a more culturally sensitive and culturally sustainable basis for further work.

Development is perhaps one of modernity's lesser grand narratives and although western intellectual communities may now espoused post-modernity or even move towards post-post-modernity, the world of ministries, agencies and their political worldview are still largely informed by modernism's notions that history is going somewhere, that things will get better, that education and science will help improve things, that language will describe things and understand them and that cause and effect, good and bad will easy to analyse.

## **Capability**

We have mentioned the capabilities approach and this seems to be gaining a very broad consensus as a successor to a purely economic or materialist account of development. Work in understanding its implications for education is only beginning and operationalizing it presents challenges.

## **Sustainability**

This has been a significant strand of development thinking and emphasises sustainability as the priority for development. In the context of learning with mobiles this resonates with the current emphasis coming from the corporations and agencies for sustainable business models. There is clearly a difference in where revenues and profits reside and on the level of local and community involvement.

## **Diffusion of Innovations**

The 'diffusion of innovations' has provided e-learning communities in the global North with their lexicon and mechanisms for much of its existence and the mobile learning community may have inherited these perspectives in its early days. In the global South 'diffusion of innovations' models are widely adopted as the mechanism for development and for formulating and optimising it.

## **Culture – there's an App**

The global South is essentialised in the same way as Africa and Africanness are, used as the basis for scaling and transferring pilots and projects. Given the importance of culture, in pedagogy and in change, perhaps it is time to look for another basis for analysing findings and outputs. The work of Hofstede provides one such basis, albeit modernist and simplistic – there is however an app for it.

## **Information Systems**

This approach to development adopts the ideas, concepts and methods of IS development used in the North. The familiarity, experience and authority of these methods amongst consultants, corporations and ministries both in the global North and global South perhaps accounts for their popularity. In relation to learning with mobiles, it may in some respects be appropriate, for example where mobiles are used for logistical and organisational support, and for mobile EMIS, educational management information systems, and in other cases, for example designing mobile learning experiences, it may be inappropriate. The capacity shortfall in much of the South may mean that more appropriate IS approaches such as prototyping, soft systems or RAD are not available even if there were culturally appropriate.

## **ICT4D & m4d**

Where these various frameworks and conceptualisations specifically address ICT, and in the global South this is a far more inclusive term than in the global North, they have coalesced under the term ICT4D, ICT for Development, and this has provided a template for a younger sibling, m4d, mobiles for development. These represent fairly all-embracing communities brought together for practical reasons of networking, funding, dissemination and advocacy. Both these communities have not been very pedagogically sophisticated and there is a space between the theorising of Western/Northern mobile learning and the development studies perspectives of ICT4d and m4d.

## **ICT4D2.0**

It is attractive to look from an account of ICT4D where the global North provides or inflicts ICT on the South to one that is consciously framed in terms of meaningful and authentic participation and collaboration. This has been called ICT4D2.0 and echoes the technical transition from web1.0 to web2.0. It consciously separates ICT4D research from the infiltration or legacy of any 'scientific' perspectives and has significant ethical and methodological implications. There is the potential as ICT4D2.0 gains traction to develop common cause with the participative and user-centred practices of the mobile learning research community.