M-Learning: Mobilising Learning in Higher Education

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Introduction

The latest teaching-learning approach in mobile learning is known as learning through mobile computational devices (Quinn, 2001), or network-based learning content (Malinen, Kari and Tiusanen, 2003). The emergence of this new pedagogical approach which promotes student centered learning experience using technologies based on mobile-learning offers opportunities, convenience, advantages and dynamic environment enabling students to succeed in their studies. This article briefly describes mobile-learning and discusses its benefits, challenges and prospects in the future education curriculum.

Mobile Learning: a Brief Description

Mobile learning, or m-learning for short, is a new concept and is very closely related to e-learning. Stone (2004), as cited in Shu-Fang Lin and Qiang Miao (2009: 3), defines m-learning as a "special type of e-learning, bound by a number of special properties and the capability of devices, bandwidth and other characteristics of the network technologies being used". According to Kaplan-Leiserson (2005), as cited in Cochrane (2007: 37), m-learning offers "new possibilities that are available to people given the mass deployment of devices that everyone now has in their hands and the new connectivity that is coming". Due to its convenience, Ismail and M. Idrus (2009: 55) refer to m-learning as "Convenience Education".

M-Learning is often defined as learning that takes place with the help of portable electronic tools (Quinn, 2001) such as PDAs and mobile phones. These devices, because of their mobility, enable educators to achieve ubiquitous learning. Mobile phones, for example, may be said to be omnipresent; used by all generations; young and old, and the short message service (SMS) is widely used due to the low cost. This has made employing mobile phones with SMS easy to enable learners obtain information and knowledge anywhere and anytime.

M-learning intersects mobile computing with e-learning; it combines individualised (or personal) learning with anytime and anywhere learning (Quinn, 2001). It is facilitated by a convergence of Internet, wireless networks, W/H devices (Wireless phones and handheld devices) and e-learning. With a W/H device, the relationship between the device and its owner becomes one-to-one, always on, always there, location aware, and personalised (Homan and Wood, 2003).

Benefits of M-Learning

One of the major benefits of m-learning is its flexibility. According to Kuzspa (2005: 3), this medium is usually available at all times, so that it is possible to "access updated information and learning content anytime and anywhere". Mobile devices, she adds, are "handy and always with you", and they are particularly suited for "repetitive learning". For example, when learning foreign languages, learners can make use of short repetition phases to better cram the whole learning materials.

Speed of access is another benefit of m-learning. Mobile devices enable learners to gain immediate access to data. For instance, a SMS text message providing information relating to a time-table change will be received much quicker as opposed to delivering the message via phone calls or emails.

Further, mobile devices are place-independent. This provides several benefits for e-learning environment such as allowing students and instructors to utilise their spare time while travelling in a train or bus to finish their homework or lesson preparation (Virvou and Alepis, 2005).

More importantly, m-learning has been found to be favourably accepted by students. A pilot research project conducted by Ismail and M. Idrus (2009) at Universiti Sains Malaysia involving distance education students reveal that students welcomed the use of mobile phone for learning. The results also show that learning via mobile phone was able to assist and motivate students' study.

Challenges

Despite its vast potentials, m-learning is still minimally developed. As Ismail and M. Idrus (2009: 55) point out, m-learning is "still in its infancy and in an embryonic stage". It is also not very common in higher education (Lomine, 2009).

The scholarship of m-learning is also still under-represented though it is steadily developing. Lomine (2009: 2) states that there is a growing volume of publications, seminars and events on m-learning hinting a real possibility that m-learning is becoming "the next big thing" in education.

In addition to the lack of scholarly work, there are some technical issues facing the use of m-learning particularly with respect to the use of hand phones. For instance, Kuszpa's (2005) study found that the small displays, buttons and keyboard on hand phones may create problems for learners.

The small displays, according to her, give too little space for a good presentation of the learning content and provides low comfort and causes eyestrain. Similarly, small buttons and keyboard are not very comfortable and offer only limited input possibilities.

> **"...m-learning, despite its various challenges, will definitely become more attractive for learners as well as for education providers in the near future making a strong and viable contribution to the education process."**

On top of these, there are also issues of inconvenience and security of carrying mobile devices. Regular charging can be a nuisance. Also, data can be lost if this is not done correctly (Kuzspa, 2005).

Finally, issues related to learners' needs must also be considered. Research on needs analysis have shown that students have specific language and learning needs. These should be taken into account by educators when developing sms-learning so that the approach is more student-oriented in fulfilling learners' needs more effectively.

Conclusion

Due to the popularity and the continuously increasing capabilities of mobile devices, the basic potential of mobile network technologies for learning purposes is undeniable. Learning everywhere and anytime can be a valuable complement to traditional learning. Admittedly, however, as noted by Kuzspa (2005), it is no substitute for traditional learning methods especially when mandatory physical presence is required. Nevertheless, with reduced prices and new business models being presented by mobile network operators, and with almost all higher education students owning at least a basic mobile device, m-learning, despite its various challenges, will definitely become more attractive for learners as well as for education providers in the near future making a strong and viable contribution to the education process.

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Malaysia-Vietnam and Malaysia-Lao PDR Workshops on Higher Education and Developing Human Capital: towards Strategic Partnerships and Alliances

Reported by Ooi Poh Ling

The Malaysia-Vietnam and Malaysia-Lao PDR workshops on Higher Education and Developing Human Capital which were held on 23-24 June 2009 and 10-11 August 2009 respectively are subsequent efforts by the Malaysian government to strengthen collaboration, particularly in the domain of higher education, with four Southeast Asian countries namely Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar and Vietnam. The workshops were organised by the Ministry of Higher Education Malaysia with the intellectual and technical support from National Higher Education Research Institute (IPPTN), Universiti Sains Malaysia. These series of workshops were conducted in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Training, Vietnam and the Ministry of Education, Lao PDR. In Hanoi, Vietnam, 45 local participants attended while in Vientiane, Lao PDR, 40 participants were present.

The two workshops deliberated on five themes:
- Higher Education: Present and Future Directions;
- Partnering and Alliances in the Academic Sector;
- Partnering in Quality Assurance;
- Linkages, Staff and Student Exchanges;
- Partnering and Alliances in the Research Sector.

In Vietnam, issues raised were poverty alleviation, training, research particularly multidisciplinary research and sharing of information through a data base. The workshop

Opening ceremony was officiated by Vice-Minister of Education, Lao PDR, Mdm. Sengdeuane Lachanthaboun.

revealed that there is a gap of information between Vietnam and Malaysia as the students in Vietnam have very vague impressions of Malaysian higher education. Thus, information sharing between Vietnam and Malaysia needs to be intensified to encourage more collaboration. Their focus of inter-exchange of knowledge and expertise is on the themes Health for All and Education for All. Training in English for academic staff and students in Vietnam was also emphasised.

In Lao PDR, a lot of emphasis was stressed on training in specific areas such as medicine, health science, engineering, tourism, entrepreneurship, leadership, e-learning, English and information technology. Lao PDR has young and inexperienced personnel who need training which Malaysia can provide. Short courses, attachment schemes and training were suggested for officials from Lao PDR which involve Malaysian higher education institutions and government offices.

Delegates and participants of the Malaysia-Vietnam Strategic Dialogue in a group photograph.

University Curriculum and Employability Needs

University curriculum that meets employability needs is deemed as an important factor in enhancing human capital development. Unemployment among public higher education institution graduates has dominated much public discussion in Malaysia and the university curricula in preparing students for the workplace has been questioned. This book reports the findings of a study that has aimed to examine the skills and competencies as required by employers in the workplace in the fields of Science, Information and Communications Technology so that current development trends can inform the designing of the university curriculum. The discussion engages quantitative and qualitative methods to elicit views from the industry managers, academics and graduates on four areas: digital age literacy skills, effective communication skills, inventive thinking skills and high productivity skills. The command of English language, technological and computer skills; the ability to communicate, to take risks and to be able to confront challenges; as well as the capacity to work hard and productively were noted as important factors that contribute to gainful employability. This comprehensive report provides several outlooks that will enable the Ministry of Higher Education, university authorities and the industry to make choices about designing learning environments that can enable university students to seek successful employability.

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Student Loan Schemes: Experiences of New Zealand, Australia, India and Thailand and Way Forward for Malaysia

Massification and democratisation of higher education had allowed tremendous increase in access for deserving students to both public and private higher education. The decrease in public expenditure on education together with the rapid expansion of student enrolment in higher education institutions have somewhat created greater financial pressures to many governments especially in the less developed countries. In many countries, the expansion of higher education adds further to the existing financial crises and there were pressures to reform the financing system of higher education in general. In view of the development of higher education, the government cannot be depended upon as the main source of financing for the sector as a whole. The central issue is who should pay the costs of resources that are required for higher education, how should education be financed, and how should allocation of funds be managed? Many argued that since university graduates can expect better job opportunities and higher lifetime earnings, students should share the cost of their education. This book brings together the experience of five countries namely, New Zealand, Australia, India, Thailand and Malaysia, in dealing with issues on student loan schemes to fund higher education. It is interesting to compare and contrast the experiences of countries which have been implementing student loan schemes with others which are only recently beginning to grapple with these issues. Arguably, for the former, student loan schemes have evolved over the years and for the latter, learning from others is very important indeed. The advantages and disadvantages of the income contingent loan as opposed to other type of loans in financing higher education were elaborated upon by the authors. The final chapters in this book discuss the way forward for Malaysia with respect to student loans based on the experiences of Australia, India, Thailand and New Zealand. Directions and plan of actions were indicated with a view towards reworking the current student loan scheme in Malaysia.
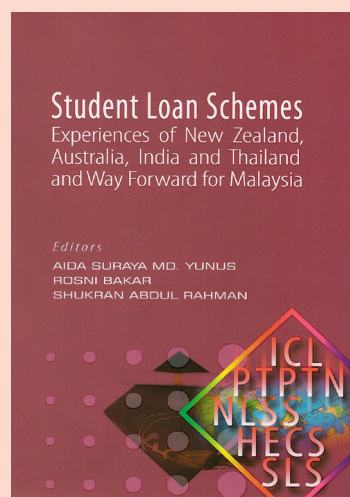
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