Where is the “m” in Skills for Life?

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There are changes afoot in the world of Skills for Life. The post-Moser “golden era” in which the teaching of literacy and numeracy moved from the shadows into the spotlight may be about to shift focus. Is there still a place for innovative and challenging approaches to learning in the skills for life field? To put it another way, can we afford not to experiment and explore as targets become more challenging and learners harder to reach?

Current policy initiatives in Skills for Life are revealing a trend towards the functional. The 14-19 Education and Skills White Paper, for example, shows the DfES giving the QCA a remit to develop functional skills in English, Mathematics and ICT “to engage purposefully as citizens and in employment”. Another trend is the apparent focus on Level 3 qualifications, with less of an emphasis on Entry level learners. ICT is still considered to be important: 21st Century Skills: Realising our potential highlights the importance of using ICT to motivate people to improve their literacy and numeracy skills.
As part of their Innovative Practice with e- learning programme, JISC have produced a good practice guide to embedding mobile and wireless technology into everyday practice www.jisc.ac.uk/learning_innovarion.html . This identifies some key benefits of using mobile and wireless technologies: portability, anytime, anyplace connectivity, flebile and timely access to learning resources, immediacy of communication, empowerment and engagement of learners, and activelearning experiences.

Embedded learning is also highlighted among a range of policy initiatives (more experienced practitioners will be sighing here – how is it possible NOT to contextualise, they might be muttering). The move towards functional skills, the closer to tie to employment and employability seem to suggest that learning materials and methodologies should all have a practical, useful for work aspect. At the same time, learning must be individualised in the new world order, with learners’ particular interests and needs targeted more precisely.

A recent publication “Personalizing Learning in the 21st Century” edited by Sara de Freitas and Chris Yapp, www.networkpress.co.uk highlights the powerful synergy between personalisation of the learning experience and the use of new digital and portable technologies.

Where then, might m-learning help Skills for Life practitioners to fulfil their ever-changing role?

First, some definitions. M-learning means mobile learning and is used to describe a range of teaching and learning practices which use new technologies: mobile phones, PDAs (personal digital assistants), iPods, GPS equipment, laptops. We should also bear in mind that the new generation of games consoles have, or will have web browser capability. However the important point to remember according to the educational community, is that it is the learner who is mobile and the device is of secondary importance.

From an original 3 year European project lead by the LSDA(see http://www.lsneducation.org.uk/research/centres/RCFTechEnhanceLearn/mobile/index.aspxsee) other research projects (mainly carried out by the NRDC) have burgeoned and commercial products have emerged which are quietly transforming learning in several parts of the UK and beyond. M-learning can no longer be sidelined as a slightly weird way of amusing learners for half an hour: it is moving into the mainstream of learning, meeting the needs of a range of learning styles. The discussion now might be more about where in the learning cycle m-learning fits most usefully.

m-learning materials
Downloadable quizzes, games and activities

m-learning materials currently take several forms. First, there is learning content which can be downloaded to a mobile phone. At its most basic, this might consist of quick multi-choice quizzes or games (e.g. snap, pairs) with literacy, numeracy or language content. Responses to the questions are made via the buttons on your phone and feedback is instantaneous. A version of this can be used with a printed text where answers are sent by sms and elicit an immediate response. You can see examples of these here http://www.m-learning.org/

It is possible (and desirable) to make the content for all of these activities contextualised into a specific area. This could be vocational e.g. for the construction or logistics industries or could meet the needs of a particular group e.g. young parents. Texts for sms response (http://www.m-learning.net/links/m-learning_SMS_details_2006.ppt) have an even wider scope. They can be made very specific and concentrate on a curriculum area and level such as decimals, fractions and percentages at L1 or broader with general literacy questions based on a particular setting such as a shopping mall or museum. It is now possible for practitioners to develop materials of this kind for their own groups of learners so that they are more "personalised" than the ringtone on your phone. The materials can be made with very little training using very basic technology (see http://portal.m/dashlearning.org/sms.qwizphp)

Once you have developed materials for a particular group of learners around a particular topic or curriculum area then you can decide where in the learning cycle your materials are a "best fit". You might decide to use them as a way of introducing a topic, or to practise a topic you have taught, or as reinforcement or homework. It's worth experimenting with materials and learners to see which works best.

More complex learning materials can be used on higher end phones with bigger screens. Animations and audio can be used to enhance the materials and to take learners through more complex conceptual scenarios. For example, one set of materials developed by Tribal CTAD demonstrates the use of a formula to work out stopping distances for a car going at different speeds with graphic and entertaining animation. (you can see this at Get Mobile details …)

Materials downloaded to phones or pdas can also be used in a directly vocational way. Some projects use pdas to illustrate particular practical tasks, for medical practitioners for example. It would be possible to illustrate a whole variety of vocational tasks in the fields of motor vehicle or beauty therapy for example, showing tricky procedures visually so that students who are practising tasks could have an instantly accessible illustration.

Private and personal

Materials you can buy or make yourself for mobile phones and xdas are useful, practical and accessible at any time and place by the learner. They exploit the affordances of the technologies – their portability and privacy aspects in particular. The learner has a greater degree of control and can fit practise into their daily lives. They can be used as a hook to attract people in to learning: the chances are this kind of approach will bear no resemblance to dark memories of classroom days. They are particularly useful for reinforcement or practise: the best example of this is probably the sets of quizzes designed to practise for the driving theory test.

mediaBoard and Blogging

A recent Nestafuturelab report 11-"Literature review in mobile technologies and learning" http://www.futurelab.org.uk/research/index.htm revealed six broad theory-based categories of

activity. Nesta identifies; Behaviourist, Situated, Constructivist, Collaborative, Informal and Lifelong and Learning and Teaching Support as categories of mobile learning.

One of the findings of the original m-learning project was that m-learning is particularly applicable in a constructivist approach to learning. During the trials of the materials, individuals would often share an activity or pass round a phone or pda among peers. Learning is often a social event and this has many benefits in the world of Skills for Life, in terms of motivating and inspiring people to take up and continue an offer to improve their skills and get involved in learning. The ICT angle of m-learning can be an incentive. There is kudos and personal gain in mastering new technologies and the confidence enhancing properties of mastering a PDA are spectacular. Many of the research projects have found that getting to grips with a PDA can provide extra confidence in tackling more mainstream IT applications, and can stimulate a new interest in using ICT to learn.

One of the ways in which learners can be involved in a group activity is by using a mediaBoard (http://www.mboard.org.uk/apps/demo/). The mediaBoard has almost limitless possibilities for learner led activities in a whole range of traditional and non-traditional contexts. In essence, it consists of a webspace (the "board" created by tutors or learners – or both together) where learners can send messages: text, picture and audio to established "zones" from their phone or pda. It is an example of how new technologies can take learning beyond the classroom in meaningful and relevant ways. Some examples of how mediaBoard can be used are:

- as the basis of a "treasure hunt". A tutor made from Southampton College set up a board from a collage of partial images collected from her local area. ESOL learners in teams were instructed to explore the area, find the original, take a picture on their pdas and send back to the board with a text message explaining what the image was and where they had found it.
- as a place to store evidence for a vocational qualification – catering students, for example, took pictures of processes and finished dishes with text explanation and comment
- as a kind of blog: learners can store pictures, sounds and information about themselves which can be as private or public as they choose
- as a tool for induction – participants can be sent out to areas around the workplace or learning centre and send back messages to a prepared board describing what happens where
- as a means to explore images of numeracy: in the Maths4Life ICT Pathfinder, a range of students from college and community took photos of what they saw as numeracy images and sent them to a Maths4Life board. The images were then used to discuss what people had found and to stimulate new numeracy projects based on the findings.
- as a means to explore local history: learners were given a quiz about the history of their area which was answered by taking pictures on phones, recording answers from museum staff and local people and sending them to a mediaBoard
- in Higher Education, students doing health related degrees are using boards to store a record of the work they do on placement – for themselves and for their tutors to keep track of what they are experiencing

Activities such as those described above show the possibilities of using new technologies to involve learners in discovery: the process of using the new technologies to record and send information is active and participatory. It is also possible to train participants to set up their own boards to be used by themselves and/or others: a possible first step to exploring the wider world of blogging.

Challenges

The development of new technologies identified by Becta in a recent publication www.becta.org.uk/publications combined with the emergence of "digital natives" and

“homozapiens” and their raised personal expectations contribute to a number of challenges/opportunities faced by the skills for life practitioner community.

Do we need to increase our understanding of the potential wireless and mobile technologies have for skills for life provision?

How do we develop the pedagogical and technological skills to support learners?
What are the issues around interoperability?
What are the implications for assessment and qualifications?
How can we ensure the quality of content?
Which agency should take the lead? How do ensure synergy and coherence and avoid disjointed incrementalism?
How do we avoid a “digital divide”?

Or shall we just let the learners take the lead?

A useful publication “Mobile Learning-a handbook for educators and trainers” Kukulska-Hulme,A and Traxler,J(2005), Open and flexible learning series, Routledge,London provides some useful insights into the potential of mobile and portable technologies.

One of the clear messages that has arisen from the research into using m-learning is that tutors can often feel unconfident about their skills in using new technologies – or, in some cases, any technology at all. There is a sense that tutors do not receive much initial training in using ICT and that this is not, as a rule, followed up with updates. There is a tendency to fall back on the tried and true and this can limit both the tutor and the learner. On the positive side, tutors who have taken part in research projects feel empowered by their new familiarity with the technologies and are enthusiastic and motivated to pass this on to learners (see Effective Practice study and M4L Pathfinder report).

Other issues include, of course, money. PDAs and tablet pcs are not cheap (although they are getting cheaper and now most phones have a built in camera and mms facility) and funders would need to be convinced of their relevance. However, particularly in terms of community groups and the harder to reach, they have the advantage of being more portable and convenient than laptops and lend themselves to the kind of innovative and motivating activities which might be more effective than more conventional applications of skills for life.

Skills for Life teaching pre Moser was often last on the list when it came to funding and innovation. The government’s strategy has changed all that and there has been a clear shift to a more central position. The current move to a more functional, embedded approach should not be an excuse to revert back to old skool methodologies and materials. A 21st Century workforce and citizenship needs to become familiar with a wide range of learning possibilities and new technologies should be part of this.

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