

Panel discussion report: the present and future of mobile learning in Gulf higher education

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Introduction

The research symposium *Mobile Learning: Gulf Perspectives* held on 25 April, 2013 culminated in a discussion about the present and future status of mobile learning in the Gulf region, among a panel of people who are currently involved in different aspects of mobile learning. The members of the panel were selected to reflect the perspectives of key stakeholders in the success of any innovative initiative at a university: administrators, faculty, researchers, IT personnel, and students. The panelists were provided with five key questions to which they responded based on their own experience and viewpoint. The panel members were:

Ms. Fairlie Atkinson: Instructor in ZU's University College, Department of Languages; a long time user of various mobile technologies in her teaching, and now an Apple Professional Developer, helping teachers to work with iPads in the classroom.

Dr. Kevin Schoepp: Director of Educational Effectiveness at ZU; also involved with the establishment of the University's Center for Educational Innovation.

Ms. Khawla Abdulkarim: Third-semester student in ZU's College of Communication and Media Sciences; this year has been her first experience of using an iPad for learning at university.

Dr. Mohamed Ally: Professor at the Center for Distance education at Athabasca University, Canada; lead researcher for mobile learning at AU's Technology Enhanced Knowledge Research Institute; one of the founding directors of the International Association For Mobile Learning.

Mr. Rashid Khan: Manager of Emerging Technologies in ZU's Computing Services department, managing and supporting mobile learning initiatives.

What is the current status of mobile learning use in higher education systems?

From an international perspective, Dr. Ally noted that according to research, mobile learning is highly related to convenience: individuals seem to use larger devices such as desktops or laptops in offices and homes, while they select mobile devices when they are commuting or on the go. As such, he stressed the need to cater for multiple devices and to make use of responsive design to meet the various needs. Dr. Schoepp highlighted that the advent of tablet technology has changed the overall concept of mobile learning: mobile phones, for example, previously imposed a number of limitations, which restricted their use to the very keen early adopters. Currently, the affordances provided by tablets, including iPads, are changing the landscape and allowing for higher use and integration in educational contexts. He stressed that the overall impact of mobile technology on learning in higher education systems is not yet very clear. While admitting that the UAE's higher education system is a small one by international standards, he stressed that it is one of the leaders and is on the cutting edge with regards to mobile learning.

Mr. Khan's input was from a technical perspective. Focusing on ZU's specific status, his response shed light on the massive iPad initiative currently implemented at ZU. He noted that during the summer of 2012 the infrastructure had to be upgraded, particularly the wireless connectivity and storage space, to support the implementation of mobile learning. So far, more than 3,300 iPads have been distributed to ZU students, with almost all faculty members receiving their own iPads. He noted that the aim is to have more than 50% of the student population receive their iPads by the fall of 2013. On the practitioner's side, Ms. Atkinson noted that the iPad initiative positions UAE faculty members in a very fortunate situation where they can play a leading role in the field. She stressed that most similar projects around the world to date are smaller in scope and are based mainly in private schools rather than tertiary government institutions. Offering a more specific idea about what is happening in the classroom, Ms. Khawla noted that the iPads provide higher accessibility to information and facilitate note taking. In addition, various applications such as iMovie and GarageBand allow for more flexibility and creation of products in different media.

What are the advantages of mobile learning in higher education institutions?

Dr. Ally stressed the importance of technological skills in the 21st century, and noted that using mobile devices in education will equip the students with the needed expertise and prepare them for success in their future careers. In addition, he highlighted the advantage provided by the mobile devices regarding knowledge accessibility. Ms. Khawla highlighted similar advantages, including the ability to follow closely with the teacher while taking notes with specific applications, making use of videos, and utilizing multiple resources that help in retaining information. She also noted the reduced need to print handouts and notes. Dr. Schoepp listed a number of areas where iPads are superior to laptops in the classroom. These included cost, startup time, battery life, and absence of a physical barrier between the students and the teachers, as is the case with the laptop screen. Beyond these specifics, he stressed that the fundamental advantage in the UAE context was to restart the dialogue about teaching and learning in the institution: the introduction of iPads acted as a lever to get people talking and becoming more involved in discussions and professional development. Mr. Khan agreed with Dr. Schoepp's ideas and added portability and the opportunity to design rich interactive immersive content allowing for higher student engagement. From an instructor's perspective, Ms. Atkinson agreed that student engagement with the outside world might be one of the biggest advantages, especially since many students are highly visual and oral in their learning preferences. With mobile tools, it is easy to capture an event from the students' daily lives, bring it into the classroom, and analyze it, allowing the instructors to easily 'flip' the classroom (EDUCAUSE, 2012).

What are the main challenges for mobile learning in higher education?

As for the challenges, Dr. Ally highlighted the absence of a pedagogical theory for mobile learning to base research on. He also noted the scarcity in research addressing mobile learning while reflecting on the relatively inadequate quality of the available literature. From a practitioner's perspective, Ms. Atkinson noted teacher and student training, infrastructure, and availability of appropriate interactive resources as areas for development. She also stressed the need to ensure that the devices are used to augment the curriculum and the learning process rather than to drive instruction. From an administrative perspective, Dr. Schoepp agreed with the importance of teacher training and designing with technology to enhance teaching and learning. He suggested that excessive focus on technological hype will only push faculty members away and make them more cynical about its usefulness; and he suggested different ways to showcase what is being done in classrooms to allow for knowledge sharing

and transfer or innovative teaching strategies. Moving to the technical issues, Mr. Khan said that ensuring a robust wireless connection across the campus, with the needed wired infrastructure, tends to be the biggest challenge. This challenge is made keener by the fact that much of the material is saved on cloud-based services. The other pressing challenge is the barely-sufficient Internet bandwidth, which is common to universities in the Gulf Region. From a student's point of view, Ms. Khawla stressed the impact of technical issues, including incompatibility of certain programs and the need for plug-ins. She also mentioned students' need to continuously search for solutions to problems they face when sharing materials.

What is the future for mobile learning?

Looking to the future, Dr. Ally said that it is not easy to predict what we will be using for teaching and learning since we do not know what technologies will be available. Thus he noted the need to prepare ourselves to design for unknown technologies, keeping in mind that these will likely be ubiquitous and not device based. Ms. Atkinson agreed with Dr. Mohamed about not knowing exactly what to expect, and gave the example that the broad term *Innovative Technologies* has been listed on the Apple website as an area to keep an eye on. However, she said that she believed that use of HTML5, whereby we interact with the web rather than with applications, will be more of the norm. She also hoped that there will be more tools for learning and language acquisition rather than just entertainment. Dr. Schoepp reflected on the probability that the future will bring not a one-device solution, but rather a combination of solutions that will address the needs of different individuals in different contexts. He also noted that open education resources will have an impact on educational systems, and that learner analytics may be of high value in blended and online programs. On the more technical side, Mr. Khan reflected on the importance of input systems and gesture-based technologies: we will likely be interacting with our mobile devices through gestures rather than using the current touch interface. Other tools to look out for include the use of eye-tracking in mobile devices, which will enable us to interact with the interface rather than the device.

What are the issues and gaps in mobile learning in the Gulf Region?

With a specific focus on the Gulf Region, Ms. Khawla raised the important issue of parental awareness and involvement. She noted that many parents do not know that mobile devices can be used for educational purposes and do not accept the fact that the younger generation is more skilled with the devices. Another important issue that she raised was online security and lack of awareness of many individuals about threats to their personal information once available online. Dr. Ally agreed and suggested that universities need to mandate courses which address and prepare students for ethical use of technology, in order to avoid various issues and problems in the classroom. He also stressed that based on his experience in the Gulf Region there is a shortage of teacher training programs which prepare instructors to design for and implement mobile learning; a deeper understanding about students' learning styles is also needed to help in better instructional design. On the more practical side of things, Mr. Khan pointed out the issue of the shortage of resources and devices which support the use of Arabic.

Ms. Atkinson further noted that we are in a fortunate position to be able to address the research needs in the region. However, she noted that the skepticism on the part of some faculty members about any initiative is due to ambiguity about how long this technology will be with them: this leads to hesitation and unwillingness to invest a lot of time and effort in creating resources. Finally, and from an administrative perspective, Dr. Kevin said that what really matters is return on investment: we do not

yet really know whether all these efforts translate into better student performance. According to him, these are interesting times since we can make use of the foundation program courses and IELTS testing to assess the impact of mobile devices on students' performance. However, he warned that this should be evaluated in relation to how the devices are integrated in teaching and learning, rather than simply the presence of these devices in the classroom/institution.

The panel discussion was followed by a question and answer session where attendees and panel members reflected on the importance of information literacy in the 21st century and the need to address it in different courses; students' and instructors' motivation with the introduction of mobile devices into the classroom; and students' accountability for their own learning at a time where mobile devices are allowing for unlimited accessibility.

The session provided a forum for a meaningful sharing of knowledge and information while highlighting the participants' agreement that these are exciting times for higher education in the Gulf region in general and for the UAE in particular.

References

EDUCAUSE (2012). *7 things you should know about flipped classrooms*.
<http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/ELI7081.pdf>