



Reflections: Train the Trainer in mLearning

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the researcher's own reflections on the learning process of "how to create mobile learning" through a series of blended training workshops. The workshops were aimed at instructional designers, learning and development trainers and other practitioners in the training field who were interested in developing successful mobile learning projects. This paper provides a reflective account of what was learned from conducting the workshops over a two year period, what were some of the immediate challenges and the recommendations for further improvements posed by the attendees. A key finding was that learners' prior experience of the new technologies varied widely, as did their skills in using the technology to deliver courses. Therefore, the training had to be grounded in highly personalized learning goals.

Keywords

eLearning, mobile learning, learning management systems, MOOCS, mLearning tools, learning mLearning

INTRODUCTION

There are many challenges when designing training courses involving the latest technologies. These challenges are even greater when the focus of the course is itself learning how to deliver training using these technologies. It cannot be assumed that all participants will have the same technical skills or understandings.

The purpose of this paper is to provide some insights into the delivery of a train-the-trainer workshop in which training professionals learn how to design courses using educational technology. The evolution of the workshop from one with primarily an eLearning focus to one in which mLearning and social media tools have come to play an increasing role is described, including the pedagogical rationale for mLearning design decisions and the various challenges that participants face, which must be taken into account in the delivery of the course.

DEVELOPMENT OF TRAIN-THE-TRAINER WORKSHOPS

Firstly, a workshop was created back in late 2011 called "E-Learning Course for Your Business" as an initiative for the Centre for Continuing Education at the University of Sydney (CCE, n.d.). The workshop mainly focused on how to develop eLearning for business owners utilising some of the most common eLearning tools on the market. The course was developed as a blended approach with face-to-face meetings in the computer lab, and set homework tasks and online participation. The audience were all adult learners, experienced managers, instructional designers and training professionals who needed to upgrade their skills in the field of eLearning. The primary enrolments were predominantly females from corporate organisations, government, higher education and business owners, and this enrolment pattern has continued in subsequent years (Table 1). The workshops were an instant success with participants wanting more. Their feedback requested

extended days to allow a) further hands-on development for exploration and learning; and b) more time to cover in depth theoretical and pedagogical approaches to eLearning.

Table 1. Enrolments in the Training Workshops Conducted in 2012 and 2013

	Year	Enrolments	Males	Females
Course 1	2011	12	2	9
Course 2	2012	7	1	6
Course 3	2012	7	0	7
Course 4	2012	11	4	7
course 5	2013	18	1	17
Course 6	2013	18	6	12
Total		74	14	49
Average		12.3	2.3	9.7

As a result of the positive reception of the initial workshops, they were continued in subsequent years. In 2012, the focus from both the instructor and the learners shifted to include mobile technologies (mLearning) and how this could be integrated into a learning management system (LMS) using open source products. The wireless access in the labs, access to the LMS Moodle (moodle.org) and learning materials were all provided by the college as part of the enrolment cost. Although in 2013 the workshops were conducted only twice due to instructor availability, the enrolments literally doubled from the previous year. In 2013 participants were expected to bring their own mobile devices (BYOD) to the workshops, These included smart-phones, tablets and iPads, which added to the complexity of the learning in such a small timeframe. In 2014 the plan is also to include the investigation of trending topics such as mobile MOOCS (massive open online courses) using systems such as Coursesites by Blackboard Inc.

THE APPROACH

The approaches used to train the trainers on mLearning and inform their own training practice were based on the “design principle for mobile learning” developed by Herrington, Herrington and Mantei (2009). This outlines the use of mobile technologies to develop new ways of teaching and learning. The main principles included real world relevance; mobile contexts; providing time for exploration; blended technologies; and, lastly, “whenever, whoever and whomever”.

Is it Real?

In order to engage the participants, real life examples, problems, challenges, investigations and exploration were developed and discussed in the workshops as mobile learning occurred. This allowed the workshop participants to develop deeper understandings and hopefully they would be equipped to develop successful mobile learning outcomes for their learners. For example, participants had to develop short video or audio clips outside the class timeframe as examples of mobile learning objects that were then tested in class by their peers using mobile technology (iPads and Smartphones)

Are the Leaner’s Mobile?

This was the most interesting to observe when the participants were learning how to create mobile learning tasks for their students. There was the consciousness that the learning objects being developed would need to be accessed by all different types of mobile devices, such as Smartphones and tablets, and not just from a desktop or laptops. So this meant that developing tasks that supported

the learners being on the move was the major aim. This was a challenge for most as they were used to developing tasks for in-class situations.

Time to Play

The general feedback was, “We need more time”. It was apparent that some participants had great ideas about how to deploy the technology; however, it was also clear that some did not. The main feedback from all participants was that the workshops were not long enough for them to practice, reflect or develop more meaningful eLearning or mLearning tasks. This was due to the fact that the main course was developed as an introductory entry point only. Further intermediate or advanced workshops were needed to allow participants time to explore the vast technological features in the development tools, social media tools and the affordance of using mobile devices for learning. For the time being, the success of the workshops was due to the variety of learners’ backgrounds and experiences brought forward to the lab and the ways in which learning was being shared amongst their peers, both in class and online. The sharing of information and the use of group tasks for the new eLearning learners was an approach that built confidence and gave them an understanding of when and how to use the available tools. The feeling was that “we are all together” on this learning journey.

To Blend or Not to Blend?

Observing the success of the participants in both learning situations (classroom and online) pointed out that using the blended approach could be a successful way of building a sustainable, creative online learning environment that connected to mobile learning. The learners’ collaborations, both in class and outside the class, on small projects using Dropbox or Google Drive were some of the good examples of using such mobile technologies in group tasks.

The Three W’s

This is not the WWW as we know it. Rather the three W’s refers to the need to be conscious at all times when developing mobile learning materials of “Whenever, Wherever, and Whoever”.

Whenever

Wherever allows the learner to be “spontaneous, unanticipated and opportunistic” (Herrington, Herrington & Mantei 2009). This was a challenge for some of the participants – to grasp new ideas in creating learning tasks that could be used in their own domain at any time. An example was students being able to take pictures on a Smartphone and uploading them to social media sites such as Instagram and Pinterest, or using an online digital diary such as Evernote.

Wherever

Traditionally learning is done in formal settings and occurs in classrooms, labs or lecture theaters. Participants were now asked to create mobile learning tasks or objects that could simply be done on the train or waiting for a bus. Checking or participating on discussion forums, or simply reading course announcements or looking up grades on the mobile phone are some of the examples discussed in class. The widespread availability of connectedness meant that learning can occur instantaneously and independently of location. That is the mind frame that the developers need to be in.

Whoever

Mobile learning can occur either on an individual or collaborative basis. Some of the tasks created in the workshops allowed the students to learn at their own pace but also being able to share that knowledge with peers both in class and outside the class settings. This made the learning more meaningful.

THE CHALLENGES

There were several challenges during the workshops and these mainly focused on the level of skill each learner had. Firstly the participants needed to explore a vast number of tools both online and offline in order to make the right decision about developing a learning task. The lack of exposure to

eLearning or mLearning tools posed a challenge to some who did not understand how mobile learning could be integrated with a LMS, for example, to deliver consistent and successful online learning experiences.

Tyler-Smith (2006) describes a conceptual model which identifies the multiple learning tasks that a first-time eLearner must negotiate or deal with immediately and simultaneously on embarking on an eLearning course: (1) negotiating the technology; (2) negotiating the course website; (3) negotiating the course content; and (4) becoming an eLearner. Adapting some of the concepts from this approach to the challenges experienced in the train-the-trainer course revealed the following:

- **Knowing the technology:** Initial challenges that faced workshop participants revolved mainly around the up-skilling and the use of various tools. Osika and Sharp (2002) comment that not only the learner needs to be proficient in mastering the course materials but also to become competent in using a range of technologies and applications. For our participants, many of them firstly overestimated their own computing skills and secondly underestimated the range of skills required to be a good eLearning or mLearning developer.
- **Which toolsets to use?** The educational technology field has a vast landscape of tools to be used in creating learning objects, modules, tasks, and assessments etc. This also includes having the knowledge to work with different formats such as text, graphics, video, audio, speech-to-text, animation, online assessments, social media integration, mobile apps and more. The ideal mLearning creator has a challenge in keeping up with ever changing technologies and consistently upgrading their own skills in the preferred areas of development. A suggested personal learning plan was introduced which was ideal in this situation to manage the learning over a period of time, even after the workshops had concluded.
- **Is mobile learning all about apps?** A major misconception of the learners was that mobile learning was, in fact, the development of a mobile native application (app) for users to download onto their phones or tablets. Several strategies were introduced to the learners, such as developing HTML5 content and/or responsive web pages that can fit on the screen of any device. These strategies were discussed in detail and exposed the participants to different avenues for creating mobile-enabled learning objects, which of course saved on development and ongoing hosting and maintenance costs.
- **Do I need to use an LMS?** Reflecting on the course confirmed that the LMS is an integral part of the success of any mobile learning module as it hosts the main information, allows consistency with course design, controls access and links to assessments; ofcourse it can facilitate an easy-to-follow mobile connectedness to the learning materials. While some of the learners had seen or used an LMS before the workshops, many were only at an entry level and others had no previous exposure. The learners soon found that most mobile learning integrations would need to be hosted or at least driven by an LMS. The workshops discussed various options such as using open source products like Moodle, CourseSites, WordPress and Joomla.
- **Do I need to be a mobile learner myself?** Yes, you do! I have similar issues with other courses such as eCommerce workshops whereby participants want to create eCommerce or mCommerce websites but yet have never bought any products online. Most participants had conducted traditional training in face-to-face mode but not in online mode. This was the most challenging aspect whereby the learner had to abandon their older belief of what it is to be a learner (classroom led) and to adopt new beliefs of online and mobile learning which are based primarily on self-directed and self-motivated learning. This means the learners are isolated from other learners and communication is mostly done through online and mobile devices. The workshop focused on homework tasks which were assigned to participants and needed to be completed between meetings over several weeks.

CONCLUSION

Most learners attending the workshops had different sets of learning goals and experiences that they wanted to achieve. Thus, whether developing eLearning or mLearning, it all has to be about “ME Learning” (Luckin et al., 2005), that is, grounded in personal experiences of learning with new technologies. The participants as educators had a lot to learn: the “ME Learning” would need to be aligned with a personal learning plan and small, achievable outcomes.

What Next?

Most of the feedback from participants expressed an interest in more formal mobile topics. Future workshop improvements that they suggested included coverage of areas such as: introduction to mobile learning, planning mobile learning, developing mobile learning curriculum, mobile learning theory and pedagogy, mobile learning tools and train-the-trainer solutions. The planning phase to push the workshop to a new level in 2014 has been initiated. The plan is to:

- increase the length of the workshop to four days instead of two;
- schedule the workshops more frequently than has been done in the past;
- include a free online learning module to accompany the workshops for students to use as a future resource after the formal workshop has been completed;
- feature real life and successful case studies of how mobile learning is being used in different industries such as higher education, health, government, finance and business;
- create social media integration for the participants to stay in touch and to ask “the experts” by building a community of mobile learners. Such media may include LinkedIn Groups, Facebook Groups, Twitter feeds, etc.;
- and, finally, invite guest speakers (online webinars) to discuss ideas and showcase some of the real mobile learning development taken place in the workforce.

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