



The Teacher's Role in Mobile Learning – Perceptions of University Students in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates students' perceptions of the role of the teacher in a proposed mobile learning environment in a developing country. The research is based on an exploratory case study at selected Pakistani universities using a qualitative data collection approach, such as focus groups. The paper aims to highlight one of the key issues, the teacher's role in the domain of mobile learning, given that mobile learning has been suggested as tending to making students more independent learners since they learn on the move or at work. It was found that students did need a lot of teachers' input throughout the learning process and wanted the teacher to control the learning process, with the exception of a few students who did show interest to be independent learners.

Keywords

Mobile learning, teacher's role, control, self-learning, developing countries

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

As learning paradigms are taking a digital shift from traditional face-to-face learning to eLearning, mobile learning and other technology-based learning, the teacher's role has been one of the critical topics being debated by the teaching and learning communities (Laurillard, 2007). Particularly, in developing countries, it is more challenging to redefine the teacher's role in a digital learning environment where teachers have had a strong hold and influence on the learning process.

In the mobile learning literature, the term *control* has been frequently used to represent the teacher's role or control over the learning process. The term control refers to the amount of grip a teacher or a learner has on the learning process for smooth continuity and best outcomes (Frohberg et al., 2009). When designing mobile learning environments, it is very important to emphasize the role of the moderator who mediates the learning process, controls it to a certain extent and creates the learning environment which nourishes learners with guided reflection; otherwise, learners may be at risk of losing direction (Sharples, 2013; Sharples et al., 2005). As a theoretical foundation for their mobile learning research, Herrington et al. (2009) discuss the concept of authentic learning where students are able to resolve real-time complex problems in professional environments and by reflection create new knowledge, at times guided by teachers. The teacher's role and intervention in the learning process is of vital importance. Pachler et al. (2010, 160) refer to "the conversational framework for supporting the formal learning process" suggested by Laurillard (2007), which shows the notion of "the world of experience" for the role of teacher in the learning process. They present a further critical analysis of the conversational framework: "Learning is viewed as a series of iterative conversations with the external world and its artefacts, with oneself, with other learners and, of course, teachers". Frohberg et al. (2009, 317) have categorized mobile learning projects (published up to 2007) from a fully teacher-controlled learning scenario to a fully learner-controlled learning scenario and recommend scaffolding as an optimized option in the middle of the two extremes. Their reasons for scaffolding recommendations include:

1. Learners are from a variety of backgrounds and have distinct learning needs.
2. Different phases of the learning process may vary in terms of need for scaffolding.
3. Scaffolding may be very appropriate for individual learning and team-based learning.
4. Learners may encounter unexpected problems or opportunities and may need to take the initiative when making decisions by themselves at times.

In mobile learning environments, it is crucial to decide how autonomous a learner should be so that the best learning outcomes can be achieved. Therefore, it is important to consider the necessary level of control when designing mobile learning environments.

RESEARCH QUESTION AND RESEARCH METHOD

The results and discussion presented in this paper were part of an exploratory case study to identify mobile learning characteristics for Pakistani university environments. The main research question for this study was: How do the students perceive the role of the teacher in a mobile learning environment in Pakistani universities?

Case study was the chosen research method and research design approach for this study. For data collection, three focus group discussion sessions were conducted in three Pakistani universities. Focus group discussion sessions were recorded and transcribed. Data was analysed in NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

RESULTS, DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The majority of participants of the focus group discussion sessions in the three Pakistani universities perceived that mobile devices in the learning environment would not replace the teacher's role, as shown in the following quotes from students participating in the focus group discussions:

I think what a teacher can deliver cannot be achieved through the mobile learning mode. We can ask questions instantly when a teacher is present. [Uni A - Student6]

Often, students do not do anything without the teacher's intervention. [Uni C - Student4]

It was explained clearly to them that mobile learning was not meant to replace the teacher with mobile devices. However, the latter requires a student to be a more independent learner as they will have to learn on their own while on the move or at work if they wish to be involved in mobile learning (Chen et al., 2004; Chen, 2009; El-Bishouty et al., 2010; Wishart and Triggs, 2010).

There were mixed responses to a question about whether students would be able to learn independently of the teacher's intervention and be responsible, independent learners. Some students said that they needed the teacher's help all the time, while others reported that they engaged in learning activities by themselves independently of the teacher.

It also depends on motivation level. For example, if I like mathematics, I will resolve problems even when I have to work hard to find a solution for a problem. For other courses, however, I would not work so hard; I mean to say if you have motivation for something, you can do it without the teacher's help or intervention. [Uni A - Student11]

Some students mentioned that they learn better when the teacher is involved: they felt pressure and accountability and therefore they submitted their assignments on time. Also, they needed teachers to reassure them that they were on the right track. One student believed that everybody would engage in mobile learning if they had no other choice, while others were of the opinion that students would love to explore and try a new mode of learning such as mobile learning as it provided so many benefits. Another student mentioned that not every course or subject matter is so simple that it can be understood independently of the teacher or so complex that the teacher needs to be consulted constantly; therefore mobile learning would be ideal for some courses, while for other courses it

might only be partially successful. Also, a student's own interest level and readiness are significant if the switch were made to mobile learning. Students also discussed that teachers should be involved in the design of mobile learning courses. One student suggested that mobile learning activities should be designed in such a way that students should find it very interesting and feel motivated to embrace it.

Teacher should design some activities to help motivate the students to do their tasks. [Uni C - Student5]

The literature also complements the idea of teachers needing to be actively involved in the testing and implementation of mobile learning in the higher education sector. Teachers also need to be motivated and appropriately trained to deliver mobile learning courses in a blended learning environment (Wang and Ryu, 2009; Jeffrey, 2009; Fernandez et al., 2009; Chen et al., 2010)

One participant mentioned an important issue regarding students from different social and academic backgrounds. For instance, some students have graduated from private schools which mostly follow the American or Western style of schooling system which includes A-Levels and O-Levels (British) where they are trained to be independent learners. However, the majority of students come from a traditional, government school system where a student is not really encouraged to be an independent learner. This underlying fact may impact significantly on the students' confidence in switching or adapting to a mobile learning mode where they are required to be independent or self-learners.

Although I agree to all of them to some extent however I will mention something important, in our session students are from matriculation background in contrast to a few people from A-levels. A-levels are habituated to completing their task without the teacher's enforcement. [Uni C - Student4]

Summary of Discussion and Findings

- Some students were happy to learn independently of teachers if the subject matter was not too complex. If the education system encouraged them to be independent learners, they would grab the opportunity.
- They did want a teacher to be involved in the design and learning of each course whether it was offered face-to-face, online or using mobile learning.
- Regarding their ability to be self-learners, many students were reluctant to be independent learners.
- Some of the students were from the public-sector high school system where they are not expected to work independently of teachers, while some students came from private school systems where the teaching and learning style is more like that of developed countries and students are given tasks to do on their own.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There is much uncertainty in the teaching and learning community about the teacher's role in a mobile learning environment. It is important to have a clear pedagogical and theoretical stance for mobile learning in order to make certain things clear, such as the teacher's role in a potential mobile learning environment. Further, education systems in different parts of the world have a great impact on how students develop expectations of the teacher's role in their learning process. Students in developing countries perceive the teacher's role as central to the learning process instead of taking responsibility themselves for their learning, with the exception of few students who did show interest towards independent learning if they were to be involved in mobile learning. In future, any potential mobile learning implementation in Pakistan needs careful planning taking into consideration students' learning habits, expectations and perceptions, as well as the traditional education system. Further, cultural factors impacting on the design of mobile learning environments in Pakistan would need to be researched in the future.

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