Individual Reflection Paper 1 : Mobile Learning

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Introduction

Over the course of my masters studies, I have learned that technologies exist in service of effective pedagogy, not the other way around (Palalas, 2018). Moreover, the best technologies are flexible and can be adapted for use in a variety of teaching contexts, including my domain of second language acquisition (McKenna, Zarestky & Anzlovar, 2018). Internet-enabled devices afford infinitely more possibilities for authentic second language usage than can occur in a typical classroom where only one person, the teacher, is fluent in the target language. (Krashen, Wang, & Lee, 2016)

Lately, I have noticed that my primary students are more likely to have access to an Internet-enabled mobile device, such as a smartphone or tablet, than to a home computer. This hunch is borne out by statistics showing that younger Canadians are more likely to access the Internet through smartphones than through computers (Canadian, n.d.). Globally, access to the Internet is most likely to be through a mobile device (Looi, 2018; White, Williams & England, 2014). I therefore believe it is incumbent upon second language teachers such as myself to attempt to understand and to harness the power of mobile technologies in order to reinforce and to enhance traditional classroom education.

In this paper, I describe the possibilities afforded by mobile learning for primary educators such as myself. Challenges associated with mobile learning integration are addressed, as are questions of educator aptitude and readiness. Recommendations for student-centred mobile device integration are presented and potential future trends for mobile learning are explored.

Potential of Mobile Learning Integration

Definitions of mobile learning vary somewhat, but researchers generally agree that mobile learning features the following characteristics:

- Mobile: Learning is not confined to a specific device or location.
- Continuous: Digital learning resources are accessible at any time.

- Adaptable: The learning experience is personal and can be adapted to meet individual needs and preferences.
- Social: Communication between peers, mentors and instructors is enabled and encouraged. (Adapted from Wang, 2018; Elsafi, 2018)

The greatest benefit of mobile learning is that formal education is no longer confined to a physical place or a specific time (White, Williams & England, 2014; Elsafi, 2018). The best mobile resources encourage higher-order thinking and deeper exploration of subjects than would be possible in a traditional classroom (Looi, 2018; NMC/CoSN, n.d.). Moreover, they place the responsibility of directing one's learning into the students' hands, empowering them and increasing engagement (White, Williams & England, 2014). Carefully selected mobile games are also effective tools for engaging and motivating learners (Crompton, Lin, Burke & Block, 2018) as they incorporate the same qualities as effective instructional design, such as clear objectives, real-time feedback, scaffolding, and interaction (Allen, 2007).

For my young learners, opportunities to practice French outside of classroom are few and far between. This reality makes mobile learning a good fit for second language education, as students can practice at a time that is convenient to them, they can practice as many times as they like (Stepp-Greany, 2003; Salaberry, 2001; Narcy-Combes, 2010), and retention is more likely within contexts that are meaningful and authentic to them (Kelly, Kennell & McBride, 2007). Parents are also keen to support their children even though they don't speak French, so mobile learning could be a major boon for them. Proponents of mobile learning recommend that mobile learning be part of a student-centred, or constructivist, learning approach, one in which students are actively engaged in searching out content, in organising it, and then in building on that content creatively, preferably in collaboration with others (Office, 2016; White, Williams & England, 2014). Such an approach requires a careful examination and reconsideration of traditional teaching practices on the part of established educators like myself. Thus far, I am finding the adoption of discovery-based learning techniques more challenging than identifying mobile technologies.

Challenges of Mobile Learning Integration

Initial criticisms to mobile learning were the same as those levelled against mobile use in general: the erosion of face-to-face relationships and the inability to critically evaluate the plethora of information available to users (Hargreaves, 2003). As mobile technologies have gradually insinuated themselves into institutions, teachers have raised more specific concerns regarding cyberbullying, privacy protections, cheating, class disruptions, erosion of teacher autonomy, and distracted students (Wishart, 2018; Palalas, 2018; Lindell & Hrastinski, 2018; Crompton, Lin, Burke & Block, 2018).

In response, some schools – even entire states and countries – have banned mobile devices from their classrooms (Kommers, 2018). Wishart (2018) argues forcefully that such bans are counterproductive. Not only are students and teachers deprived of an important pedagogical resource, but educators also lose the opportunity to teach and to demonstrate responsible mobile device use to their students (Wishart, 2018). While I approve of bans at the primary level due to the real possibility of theft and loss, I also agree with those who argue for the intelligent integration of mobile devices in middle and secondary grades, preferably with rules arrived at through student consultation (Wishart, 2018). Responsible Internet usage, or digital citizenship, is also a cornerstone of the International Society for Technology in Education's (ISTE) standards guides for education technology integration (International, 2008).

The two greatest challenges to effective mobile learning integration are 1) the affordability of Internet-enabled devices and, 2) access to reliable high-speed Internet. (Delgado, Wardlow, McKnight & O'Malley, 2015; Office, 2016; Van Praag & Sanchez, 2015). The Office of Educational Technology (2016) advocates for the distribution of identical devices and data plans to all students in order to ensure equity, to reduce the instructional burden, and to protect student data and privacy. This approach assumes that schools have the monies to fund such initiatives, an unlikely scenario in many, if not most, schools including mine (Delgado, Wardlow, McKnight & O'Malley, 2015). Others suggest that BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) policies are acceptable provided such

mobile learning initiatives don't further disadvantage those whose devices are older and there are mechanisms in place for those lacking access to a reliable device (White, Williams & England, 2014; Van Praag & Sanchez, 2015).

There's no point in fretting over a particular student's mobile device if Internet access isn't readily available to support its use. I have recently experienced this phenomenon. Out of my 18 kindergarten families, one does not have reliable, persistent access to broadband Internet, and hence no email account. I need to double my communications in digital and paper formats as a result. I also hesitate to task my students with "digital homework", since this further disadvantages my unconnected student. Conole and Paredes (2018), suggest that free Wi-Fi is nearly ubiquitous, but that has not been my experience when travelling.

A great deal of "hidden work" is also required of educators seeking to integrate mobile technologies in the classroom (White, Williams & England, 2014). A lack of familiarity with mobile technologies, of effective role models, or of pertinent professional development opportunities may stymie attempts at integrating mobile technologies in the classroom (Van Praag & Sanchez, 2015). For those educators who do take the plunge, restructuring the classroom into modes that favour mobile learning, such as hybrid or blended learning and "flipped" classrooms (Delgado, Wardlow, McKnight & O'Malley, 2015) and identifying and adapting useful resources for lessons can prove a monumental task (White, Williams & England, 2014; Power, 2018). I have personally experienced this, as accessible French language resources on the Web are rare or hard to navigate. One of my long-term goals is the creation of a crowd sourced database for vetting online resources for non-ELA second-language educators.

Final Reflections and Future Directions

Before pursuing graduate studies, I had a very positive attitude towards digital technologies, considering them the "future" of education. My current position is more nuanced. I agree with Palalas (2018), when she says that digital technologies "are neither

good nor bad; they are merely tools which, if used properly, can empower and help learn and, when misused, can lead to cognitive and emotional exhaustion…" (pp. 39-40).

While I recognize the significant barriers to effective mobile learning integration, particularly among younger learners, I also appreciate their potential. Any tool that can hasten my students' uptake of French is a welcome addition to my classroom. Researching the subject of mobile learning has not scared me off of attempting its implementation, but it has reminded me that careful planning, sensitivity, and a great deal of flexibility will be required on my part. Until my students have universal access to mobile devices, I will also have to continue designing effective paper-based alternatives for my unconnected students.

I also agree with researchers who recognize the need for more data in a field that is still in its infancy. (Elsafi, 2018; Crompton, Lin, Burke & Block, 2018; Looi, 2018; Lindell & Hrastisnski, 2018). Data suggests that mobile device ownership and usage will continue to grow among the current generation of young learners and their families, quite possibly at the expense of traditional laptops and desktop computers (Beres, 2011). Since much research is undertaken in post-secondary environments, I take this message as a call to instigate my own research into mobile learning at the primary and elementary levels.

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