MOBILE LEARNING IN SUPPORT OF EDUCATION FOR ALL

Concept Note to Frame the Conversations at the
UNESCO Mobile Learning Week

12-16 December 2011

UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, France
PURPOSE

This background document helps to frame the conversations at the UNESCO Mobile Learning Week, which will take place on 12-16 December 2011, in partnership with NOKIA.

The main purpose of the Mobile Learning Week is twofold: firstly, to inform a UNESCO-led initiative that seeks to develop national policy guidelines for mobile learning and, secondly, to provide insights into how mobile technologies can support teachers and teacher professional development. The policy guidelines aim to help countries harness the potential of mobile technologies to improve education and advance the global development challenge of providing Education for All (EFA) by 2015.

FRAMING THE PROBLEM

The UNESCO Education for All Global Monitoring Report (2010) suggests that while real progress has been made in education, challenges remain. On the positive side, in the past decade enrolment rates in sub-Saharan Africa increased five times faster than they did in the 1990s, and on the whole, gender disparities in primary schools are narrowing. However, many of the advances are in danger of reversing because of rising poverty and anaemic economic growth. The recent economic crisis has strained government budgets, increased financial volatility, and caused a spike in unemployment. These challenges both frame and give urgency to UNESCO efforts to build on past gains and expand the delivery of education to all students, especially women and girls.

The EFA challenge coincides with an unprecedented growth in access to mobile phones, particularly in developing countries. The International Telecommunication Union estimated that in 2010 there were 5.3 billion mobile phone subscribers worldwide, over double the number in 2005. Impressively, most of this growth came from developing countries. Access to mobile networks is now available to 90% of the world population and 80% of the population living in rural areas. Prepaid mobile subscriptions, the declining price of handsets, efforts to deregulate the telecom sector, and rapidly expanding access to powerful 3G data transmission platforms, are sure to continue fuelling this growth.

The changing technological landscape has generated considerable enthusiasm about the role mobile devices might play in improving education access, quality, and equity. A number of mobile learning initiatives have emerged to explore the potential and impact of mobile learning. Underlying these initiatives is a set of assumptions that mobile technologies might be capable of not only expanding access to education, but changing it in substantive ways by perhaps spurning new literacies and revealing new pathways and contexts for learning.

The Mobile Learning Week initiates conversations about the direction, promise, and challenges of mobile learning. UNESCO encourages participants to draw on and
learn from the varied experiences of conference attendees as well as UNESCO-commissioned and other research, and to participate in the efforts to better understand how mobile technologies might be able to support education around the world.

WORKING DEFINITIONS

Because mobile learning is emergent and fast-changing in nature, because it is a highly situated and contextualised phenomenon, and because there are a number of stakeholders with varying world views involved, it becomes challenging to offer universal definitions of concepts that relate to mobile learning. However, in an attempt to define the parameters of these conversations, UNESCO offers the following working definitions.

Mobile Technologies

UNESCO considers mobile technologies as a combination of hardware, operating systems, networking and software including content, learning platforms, and applications. Mobile technology devices range from basic mobile phones to tablet PCs, and include PDAs, MP3 players, memory sticks, e-readers, and smart phones. For the purposes of its current engagement in mobile learning, UNESCO is proposing to confine the conversation around mobile technologies to the mobile phone. UNESCO recognises, however, that the mobile phone itself is evolving rapidly and it intends to take cognisance of how this evolution will develop over the coming decade. UNESCO recognises that the integration of mobile phones challenges traditional education paradigms. They are different to chalk and pencils because they enable instantaneous access to vast and growing reservoirs of information, and they provide a growing array of permutations to communicate and share knowledge between individuals and groups independent of time and physical location. Mobile phones are almost universally accessible. This is what makes UNESCO interested in their potential for supporting learning, teaching and education transformation.

Many pilot projects have explored this. So far, these have shown that mobile phones can enable literacy development, promote learner motivation, enhance access to teacher development opportunities and improve communication between parents, teachers and principals. Evidence from the Arab Spring further suggests that mobile phones can enable a stronger sense of agency especially among youth and women.

Whilst they offer a glimmer of hope, many remain sceptical about their educational value and sustainability. These range inter alia, from the disruption that they cause to traditional models of learning, teaching and pedagogy which are challenged by emerging new languages, genres and literacies, to the infringements on privacy and security of users. Moreover, when compared with other specialisations within education, mobile learning as an emergent phenomenon is largely under-theorised.

For these reasons, UNESCO wants to caution against sweeping claims about the role of mobile phones in resolving the complexities of today’s educational challenges, especially in developing countries. However, UNESCO recognises that the potential they offer to support improved educational outcomes needs to be explored.
How Does UNESCO Define Mobile Learning?

Traxler (2009) suggests that some advocates of mobile learning attempt to conceptualise it in terms of devices and technologies; others focus on the mobility of learners and the mobility of learning, and in terms of the learners’ experience of learning with mobile devices. He offers an emerging taxonomy of mobile learning and relates this to a shared understanding of e-learning which may be worth consideration. For UNESCO’s purposes, alongside the focus on mobility of the learner and learning, in the context of developing national policy guidelines, mobile learning also includes the integration and mobility of system-wide learning and system-strengthening activities. This includes education delivery, administration, governance and management. In this sense, UNESCO will sometimes refer to mobile education interchangeably.

National Policy and Mobile Learning

Many governments have adopted some form of ICT in Education policy. Policies are the strategic statement that provides the broader context for change. They articulate a vision that motivates people to change and co-ordinate disparate efforts within the system and across sectors. Policies are also operational in that they include action plans, programs and projects that provide the mechanism and resources by which strategic visions are realised. Many national policies on ICT in Education include policies on teacher professional development, pedagogical change, curricula development, assessment reform, restructuring education institutions and technological infrastructure (Kozma, 2011). They are linked to implementation strategies which include the establishment of multi-stakeholder partnerships, monitoring, evaluation and research as well as strategies on sustainability. Because mobile learning is a more recent phenomenon, it features less prominently in national policies that have been developed in the ‘pre-mobile’ era. This highlights the gap that UNESCO’s proposed policy guidelines on mobile seeks to address.

UNESCO aims to discuss the key policy implications around mobile learning based on a comparison and exchange of experiences across the globe. Here UNESCO will draw on two studies that it has already commissioned. One is a global review of mobile learning initiatives and their policy implications in five regions: Asia, Europe, Latin America, Middle East and Africa and North America. The other is a review of mobile learning and teacher development in these five regions. The initial findings of these reviews will be shared during the Mobile Learning Week.

Because of the dynamism of mobile learning, UNESCO’s approach is largely exploratory and focused on sense-making and learning, alongside and in collaboration with a community of practice.

The Mobile Learning Week will include UNESCO’s First Symposium on Mobile Learning where representatives from a range of stakeholder groups will share ideas on these issues. It is hoped that by the end of the Mobile Learning Week:

- UNESCO will have been guided on optimal ways to approach its work on the development of national policy guidelines on mobile learning;
UNESCO will have been guided on optimal design of its interventions on teacher development and mobile learning;
UNESCO will have consolidated stronger collaboration within a community of practice on mobile learning; and
UNESCO will have clarified its role as an important stakeholder within an evolving mobile learning environment.

CONCLUSION

The Mobile Learning Week is a starting point of an on-going dialogue and exploration of how best to harness the potential of mobile technologies in support of the EFA goals. In the collective quest to find optimal ways to improve education, it is important to accommodate open conversation, open-mindedly consider varying and sometimes conflicting viewpoints, and continue to ask tough and smart questions. Only on this basis will it be possible to engage with the complexities of transforming education and society.

REFERENCES


