M-Learning Reaches a Tipping Point

THANKS TO TABLETS AND SMARTPHONES, E-LEARNING CAN BE FREED FROM OFFICE COMPUTERS.

BY DR. ALLEN PARTRIDGE

M-learning (mobile learning) has been a buzzword in e-learning for decades. Nearly every year, someone speculates that the time for m-learning has finally arrived — and just about that often we discover that very few people actually are producing their learning content for mobile devices.

Nonetheless, the landscape is clearly changing all around us. A recent (2012) study from Sterling Brands and Ipsos, commissioned by Google, found that Americans (participants were from Boston, Austin and Los Angeles) engage with screens (computer, tablet, television and smartphones) 90 percent of the time. Participants reported that only 10 percent of their daily interactions with media were with printed publications. It's a paradigm-altering realization when you consider that all but a few interactions with media are with rich (screen-based) media. The same study went on to identify staggering numbers of individual daily interaction with various devices, and reported that Americans typically spend a lot of time interacting with the screens on their devices and watching their television.

That study noted that we spend an average of 4.1 hours each day interacting with screens. About a quarter of our interactions (24 percent) are spent on a personal computer, while 38 percent of those screen interactions are with our smartphones. Nine percent of daily interactions are with a tablet, and the remaining time is spent before a television. Interestingly, the study also revealed that we are attempting to multi-task much of that time. It found that 77 percent of TV viewers are using a smart device while they watch television.

This phenomena of referencing screens for information and communication is pervasive. It is found almost as commonly in education. A 2012 study from Interactive Educational System Design (IESD) found that 53.8 percent of participants (qualified educators) reported that schools in their district had adopted at least some (25 percent or more) mobile technology. The same study found that more than a third of additional districts expected to reach the same levels of mobile adoption by 2013. If the projections of educators holds true, more than 75 percent of schools would have adopted mobile technologies (at least to some extent) by today.

Janet Clarey, in a 2012 study for Bersin on “The Rise of On-Demand Mobile Video for Learning and Development,” clarifies that mobile learning is reaching a clear watershed moment: “…mobile learning, m-learning, mobile enablement or mobile performance support is here in a big way.” By August of 2012, Jeff Freyermuth described the state of e-learning aptly, by declaring via his Gartner Report title that “the adoption of mobile learning is approaching a tipping point.” In his article, Freyermuth cites the adoption of mobile device technologies by the public (employees and learners) as the impetus for the tipping point. Because people have the devices and use them for other things, their behavior and expectations are changing. That change in behavior and expectations creates a fundamental change in the landscape, and with it an opportunity to make the most of the new expectations. I agree with Freyermuth: the impetus for change is coming from the masses, that will drive the adoption of mobile learning — not the will of the technology industry. So solutions must serve the needs of learners and learning content developers.

HOW M-LEARNING IS DIFFERENT

It makes sense in this context to also examine the potential of m-learning to add value to learning overall. Just as the behavior of people has changed to adapt to the presence of mobile devices (consider obsessive texting and Facebooking over lunch for example), it is also an open door to consider expanding the opportunity for learning content, because it is unhinged from the traditional office environment — and because of the additional tools that are exposed, thanks to the tablet and smartphone capabilities. You could summarize this enhanced capacity as follows:

→ Mobile learners are free to learn anywhere.
→ Mobile learners are free to learn anytime.
→ Mobile learners are able to move while learning.
→ Mobile learners can be tracked physically; the location of their learning becomes a potential learning tool.
→ Mobile learners can make use of the conventions of touch computing, including gestures and pinch zooms for example.
→ Mobile learners can interact with their devices in unexpected ways, like tilting or flipping a phone to communicate an idea or give an instruction.
Mobile learners can communicate with others using their devices.
Mobile learners can create images and video with their devices.
The list echoes the sentiment of Dr. Shannon Arvizu, who in 2013 published "Disrupting the University: Near-Term Opportunities in the Digital Learning Market."

In the report for GigaOm Pro, Arvizu identified three trends for the near-term evolution of the university:
1) “anytime education,” granting students access to educational content, classmates and teachers anytime, anywhere;
2) “personalized education,” customized to the specific needs of each individual student; and
3) “project-based education.”

While I’m skeptical that American universities are as near to these steps toward constructivism as Arvizu suggests, I certainly see both the opportunity for meeting the expectations of students regarding anywhere/anytime learning with m-learning solutions.

The competitive landscape is also in place to drive m-learning both within education and within the commercial sector. As universities struggle to compete for a shrinking number of students, it becomes apparent that more and more, online educational institutions are driving home the message that they can offer more education for less money and with greater convenience. At the same time, employers are competing for shrinking numbers of knowledge workers who are able to offer the appropriate balance of social, technical and communication skills to be problem solvers and leaders in a 21st-century workplace.

In a fascinating 2013 report from Ambi- dent Insight, Sam Adkins identifies clearly how the worldwide market for self-paced learning will surpass $50 billion in annual revenue by 2016. Nestled away on page 26, Adkins describes a link that clearly points to another trend that provides evidence that the m-learning tipping point is upon us. It turns out that m-learning not only makes good sense for education, it’s also potentially quite lucrative. At least a significant number of global telecom companies appear to think so. Adkins calls telecom companies the “new disruptors” in e-learning and identifies more than 60 that are actively involved in providing e-learning content online for their respective countries. According to the report, “a very new trend is the entrance of telecoms into the global e-learning market. They are often the major suppliers in specific countries and sometimes across regions. They are now offering self-paced e-learning products targeted to consumers, corporations, government agencies and academic buyers.”

Mobil21, a developer of an authoring tool for creating dedicated m-learning content, published a report entitled “Mobile Learning Basics.” In the report, the authors list some of the challenges faced in m-learning today. Perhaps chief among them is the lack of a single clear “mobile theory of learning.”

QUESTIONS ANSWERED

So have we reached the tipping point at which mobile learning developers will finally start producing content that leverages the power of mobile learning? Well, there are still significant obstacles to m-learning development. Perhaps the obstacles ahead of us are one reason noted industry research firm Gartner chose to place m-learning for smartphones deep in the valley of disillusionment in its 2013 hype cycle for e-learning. Gartner estimates the stabilization of m-learning to come slowly, projecting the eventual plateau of productivity could be as far out as 10 years. If we accept Gartner’s predictions, it seems we are still quite a ways away from meaningful adoption of m-learning.

The other major challenge is the lack of a technology solution that is appropriate for the audience. It is always important to remember that the authors of e-learning (and eventually of m-learning) courses are trainers, teachers, subject-matter experts, and everyday people whose expertise is either instructional design or the topic upon which the training is based. Course authors are very seldom multimedia experts. Even less often are they mobile learning experts. The technical challenges of creating interactive content, centered around authentic student learning are substantial. Rather than force instructional designers and trainers, educators and subject-matter experts to learn the latest about global geo- positioning, complex gestural multimedia interactions and accelerometers, shouldn’t we look to the industry to provide solutions for responsive design, location based learning and device specific inputs that are simple to use, so that m-learning authors can continue to focus on adding value to educational experiences, rather than on mastering complex new technologies?

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