

Micro-Learning in the Lifelong Learning Context (Introductory Note)

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We have reached the stage at which e-learning is virtually synonymous with learning technology. In the rapidly expanding field of e-Learning, micro-learning is a new arrival on the scene. It responds to the urgent need to pay greater attention to e-learning tools and methods from an educational and not simply a technological point of view. Learning technologies as such are by no means a new invention – they reach back to the age-old chalk slate and beyond – but their effectiveness depends on the way in which they are embedded in the social construction of teaching and learning relations and processes. The more powerful and pervasive the learning technology, the more crucial and complex will be the pedagogic strategies and didactic methods devised and employed for and with that technology.

The pervasiveness of digital communication technologies in everyday life is indisputable, and is by no means limited to the advanced economies. Indeed, one of the most remarkable features of their take-up is the extent to which developing and ‘tiger’ regions have adopted, for example, the Internet and mobile telephones. The Web is already a core relay for learning programmes in Latin America, where there is a longstanding distance learning tradition using radio and television. The Philippines have the highest SMS usage rate in the world – an intriguing phenomenon, which reflects the intersections between a highly communicative culture, a history of emigrant labour, an island archipelago geography and, not least, the need to keep telephone costs down to a level that ordinary citizens with low average incomes can afford.

Such examples illustrate that cultures do not simply adopt technologies, they equally adapt them to suit their own needs and ways of life. This tells us something important about developing effective learning technologies: pedagogy and didactics must relate appropriately to the cultural, economic and social contexts and conditions of people’s lives. This is clearly one of the key challenges for micro-learning, which seeks, in a variety of ways, to integrate learning into everyday life. One obvious consequence is that this situates the micro-learning agenda in proximity to that of non-formal and informal learning, a theme that has also seen a meteoric rise to the top of European education and training policy concerns in the past few years. This has taken place in the context of identifying lifelong learning as the overarching paradigm for teaching, training and learning in knowledge societies, in the interests of not only employability but equally social cohesion, active citizenship and personal development in a democratic polity.

These may be fine words in principle, but turning them into positive practice means a great deal of hard work in research and development terms. This collection illustrates how some of that work is taking place – some examples are well developed, others are just starting out.

And no collection of this kind would be complete without visionary accounts of what the future may hold. The combined outcome is stimulating and will generate readers' excitement about the potential of micro-learning. At the same time, it is all too easy to forget that e-learning innovations also generate new polarisations in learning opportunities and life chances: people need to be digitally literate in order to access digital learning tools, and they cannot participate in e-societies and e-cultures unless they have access to and know how to use digital information and communication channels.

It is still the case that the majority of today's Europeans – let alone those living in less developed world regions – do not possess basic digital literacy skills, and there remain significant social and regional differences in pure and simple access to the technological hardware. And even where citizens do largely use relevant tools – such as mobile telephones – levels of competence to exploit their potential are generally low. Those with low levels of education, those in low-level jobs, older citizens and those living in more isolated areas are especially likely to be 'digitally disadvantaged', and there is a striking digital gap between the north and the south of Europe in these respects. Given the combination between demographic transition to ageing European societies, structural change in the labour market towards higher-level skill and competence requirements, and cultural change towards a learning society as the basis for inclusion and participation of all kinds, it is abundantly evident that dismantling the digital divide is and will remain one of the most significant educational challenges for the coming decades.

Micro-learning can contribute to meeting that challenge, and in doing so it must invest ingenuity to design low-threshold tools and methods that can engage learners with low levels of basic skills – both traditional and digital – in ways that attract and encourage them, in ways that are relevant to their everyday lives and in ways that provide rapid, visible affirmation and recognition of what they have learned.

The Institute of Educational Sciences at the Leopold-Franzens-University of Innsbruck is delighted to have been associated with the conference that gave rise to this collection, and regards e-learning research as an important element of its academic profile within the newly-founded Education, Generation and Life-course Research Group. We look forward to continuing the positive co-operation with the e-Learning Research Studio that has been established in the context of this conference.