Exploring the Meaning of Mobile Learning for Informal Learning: Preliminary and Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

This study defines mobile technology (specifically in this study, smart phone technology) as a contemporary learning tool and environment that can make a difference in users’ informal learning practice. Currently, in Korea, there are thirteen millions smart phone users and the number of smart phone users worldwide is expected to exceed one billion by 2013. Mobile technology is, therefore, becoming a device that many people carry every day and its possibility to facilitate learning seems to be highly promising. With such societal and cultural movement in mind, to understand the nature of mobile users’ experiences and their meanings in terms of learning, the study investigates (a) users’ actual experiences in using mobile, (b) users’ perceptions toward the effectiveness and meaning of mobile for learning, and (c) the characteristics of informal learning appeared through mobile learning. In other words, the study aims to suggest practical guidelines by answering to the following inquiries; 1) which experiences do the mobile users perceive conducive to learning? 2) depending on how users understand and define learning in general, does it influence on their use and perception of mobile as a learning tool?, and 3) what can be the most effective way of using mobile for learning in relation to the perspectives of informal learning? Here, the theory of informal learning is applied as a framework. Informal learning, in a broader sense, defines everyday experiences from which we learn something (Merriam & Cafarrella, 1999). According to Schugurensky (2000), informal learning can take different forms due to the presence or absence of intentionality and awareness of learning. He defines informal learning in three forms - self-directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization. While mobile learning has been researched a lot recently, its potential for informal learning, especially for adults has hardly been studied. The research study was conducted in Korea in summer, 2011 and plans to conduct the sequel in USA in fall, 2011. The online survey questionnaire consisted of 20 questions was developed and implemented and the mixed research methodology was applied in that it included both quantitative multiple-choice items and qualitative open-ended questions. The initial findings show that the majority of participants became aware of positive changes in everyday life, including learning. Also, three forms of informal learning; directed learning, incidental learning, and socialization were respectively identified in this environment. More specifically, mobile is perceived to be meaningful especially for directed (or self-regulated) learning while it is seen to be least beneficial for incidental learning. For socialization, interestingly, only certain participants agree that it has occurred through mobile learning or may occur. Finally, the participants find mobile the most useful for information search and knowledge acquisition. In conclusion, the mobile platform can facilitate different types of informal learning and work not merely as a learning tool but a learning environment ultimately. It particularly seems to enhance adults’ learning more enriched and prospered.

Keywords: Guiding Principles, Informal Learning, Mobile Learning Technologies, Personal Learning Environments, Smart Phone Technology

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1. INTRODUCTION

Technological advancements in wireless communication have created new possibilities for people to connect and interact. Educators and researchers are becoming aware of how mobile technologies used in our daily life can be utilized for developing new environments that may have a significant impact on learning. They can be used to support various learning activities. The usage of handheld devices may contribute to create new patterns of communication and facilitate social learning process (Liu & Kao, 2007; Roschelle, 2003; Zurita & Nussbaum, 2004).

This study aims to explore mobile technologies as a new potential providing a new interaction for informal learning environment. Advanced Mobile devices represented by iPhone, for example, have been a social phenomenon for the last years and their features have been combined with the latest development in web-based technology. Today, Nielsen report that 31% of US mobile phone owners have a smartphone as of December 2010, and expect smartphones to become the majority by the end of 2011 (onlinemarketing-trends.com).

Almost one in three Koreans now owns a smartphone in 2011 (chosunilbo.com). According to the International Data Corporation (IDC) Worldwide Quarterly Mobile Phone Tracker, vendors will ship a total of 472 million smartphones in 2011 (idc.com). That figure will nearly double to 982 million by the end of 2015 (mobiletechnews.com).

In the previous studies focusing on mobile, researchers argue that mobile technology can be an effective instructional tool. We, the researchers assume that since mobile device is a tool you carry out all the time every day, it can be utilized the most for informal learning. This study aims, therefore, to explore the nature of users’ experiences in using mobile technology and the meaning of experiences in terms of their everyday learning. The study investigates (a) users’ actual experiences in using mobile, (b) users’ perceptions toward the effectiveness and meaning of mobile for learning, and (c) the characteristics of informal learning appeared through mobile learning. Therefore, the research questions were:

1. What are main communications and features of using mobile technology for learning and users’ experiences related to learning?
2. What are users’ perceptions toward the effectiveness and meaning of mobile for learning?
3. What are characteristics of informal learning appeared through mobile learning?

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. Characteristics of Adult Informal Learning

Unlike children or adolescents who are supposed to learn in formal educational settings such as schools, adults learn more in diverse and flexible settings. Adults may learn significantly in more incidental and spontaneous learning situation even inside educational settings. These cases correspond to informal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). In broader sense, informal learning includes the experiences of everyday living from which we learn something (Merriam & Cafarrella, 1999).

Informal learning has a formidable merit, in that it has wide flexibility that makes people involve freely and voluntarily in learning without the presence of instructors and externally imposed curricular criteria (Livingstone, 2001). With less restriction, it can be more learner-centered when learners can actively decide important things from time and place to learn to purposes and outcomes of learning.

Empirical studies regarding adult informal learning have shown that the overwhelming majority of adults spend a substantial amount of time in their pursuit of informal learning.