Chapter 50

Podcasting as a Mobile Learning Technology:
A Study of iTunes U Learners

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that portability was perceived as one of the major benefits of podcasting as a teaching and learning tool, little evidence has been found of users taking advantage of this feature for academic use. This paper reports on a major study (1886 responses) of iTunes U users. The analysis compares the responses of those participants who use static devices to play the materials they download with those of users who utilise mobile devices. The results show that more users play iTunes U materials from mobile devices than static devices. Users share some similarities in their use of podcasts but some marked differences as well, in contrast with previous research. The author argues that different perceptions and practices are based on whether the users are formal or informal learners and discuss the implications for the use of podcasting as a mobile learning technology.

1. INTRODUCTION

When, 10 years ago, podcasting started to become a popular means of producing and delivering audio-visual materials, many academics began to explore its potential as a teaching and learning technology. Researchers identified a number of potential benefits and high among them was portability: the ability to make learning available anytime and anywhere (Blaisdell, 2006; Cebeci and Tekdal, 2006; Clark and Walsh, 2005; Evans 2008). In other words: podcasting was seen as a technology that would enable mobile learning.

A podcast is an audio or video file that is distributed over the internet, normally through a subscription service as part of a collection of files. These media files appear in a variety of formats (most commonly mp3s for audio and mpeg for video, although other formats such as m4a, m4v and mp4 are also used), and can be played on a number of devices (portable and static). Whilst some file formats used to be unique to specific

devices, creating a barrier for users to download resources from certain podcast repositories, most devices are able to play a wide variety of file format nowadays. Although podcast collections sometimes include additional resources such as PDFs, which can be downloaded alongside the audio or video files, these additional resources are not usually considered podcasts as such.

Definitions of mobile learning have evolved with the emergence of different types of devices and the affordances they provide. An early definition of mobile learning stated that it takes place "when the learner is not at a fixed, predetermined location, or when the learner 'takes advantage of the learning opportunities offered by mobile technologies'" (Kukulska-Hulme, 2005, p. 1). Those learning opportunities have increased vastly in the last few years with the proliferation of devices that can afford mobile learning (mobile phones, personal media players, smartphones, small tablets) and with the advances in technology that allow storage of content (larger memory at affordable prices, cloud computing) and connectivity (higher download speeds, lower cost). Some definitions of mobile learning have been device-centric, whereas others describe mobile learning as "mediated by mobile devices, characterised by the mobility of the learners, and/or the mobility or accessibility of the content considered" (Hamm et al, 2014, p.3). Mobile learning achievements include enhancing learning, reaching out to remote learners, theory building, motivation and community building, although not without challenges (Traxler, 2011). The rapid growth in availability and popularity of mobile devices have made them ubiquitous in many territories, with some arguing that "as mobile devices become even more powerful and versatile, we are likely to see more users make them their primary, perhaps their sole computing devices." (Godwin-Jones, 2011, p.8). Podcasting is an example of didactic mobile learning, defined as "learning from mobile educational material (…) in a way that responds to the potential and the limitations of mobile devices" (Kukulska-Hulme

and Traxler, 2005, p. 26). Although advances in connectivity mean that podcast users can also engage in discursive mobile learning, based on interaction among mobile learners, didactic mobile learning remains the most common way users engage with podcast materials.

Many of the recommendations of mobile learning practice apply to the use of podcasting for learning. These include the provision of resources that can be used autonomously, appropriate length, taking screen size into consideration in the design of resources (which applies to video podcasts) and chunking knowledge as independent learning objects to facilitate processing of information (Ally, 2004). However, these and all other affordances that podcasting can bring can only be considered mobile learning if users access podcasts from their mobile devices rather than from their desktop or laptop computers. When learners listen to podcasts through their mobile devices, they integrate their learning into their lifelong learning processes, as advocated by theories of informal and lifelong learning, which view learning as something that can happen in everyday life outside the classroom, whether intentionally or accidentally (Naismith, Lonsdale, Vavoula, and Sharples, 2005). Podcasting technology also facilitates 'just in time learning' "where learners can often take advantage of unexpected free time since they often have their devices with them" (Evans, 2008, p. 492).

Users of mobile devices such as mobile phones tend to utilise them in short windows of time throughout the day rather than in dedicated sessions. A report by Ofcom (the independent regulator and competition authority for the UK communications industries) claims that 81% of smartphone users keep their device switched on all day. It also reports that

… over half (51 per cent) of adults and two thirds (65 per cent) of teenagers say they have used their smartphone while socialising with others, nearly a quarter (23 per cent) of adults and a third (34 per cent) of teenagers have used them during meal-

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