

PROMOTING mLEARNING BY THE UniWap PROJECT WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Finnish universities are on the edge of transforming towards a symbiosis of traditional university and virtual university. The University of Helsinki established the Educational Centre for ICT in the beginning of 2000 to support university teachers in their attempts to benefit from technology in their teaching and to develop their pedagogy to use information and communication technologies for didactic purposes. One of the research and development projects that have been set up by the centre is the UniWap project. The aim of the project is to develop educational use of mobile technology and to find out pedagogical applications that are beneficial to students and faculty in the virtual university. The project deals with the WAP technology to be tested, piloted and completed in order to facilitate teaching and learning in the university. The project is a joint venture of the Helsinki University and *ICL Invia*. The mCastor technology enables the user, who may have several terminals like WAP, PC or Communicator, to use the same information service or system adapted to the actual user environment.

THE mLEARNING CONCEPT

The term 'mLearning' has lately emerged to be associated with the use of mobile technology in education. It seems, however, that it is used in commercial purposes rather than as an educational concept. We wonder if the term is a commercial trick to market technology and educational services or if it is an emerging concept that educators should take seriously. 'Just what is mobile elearning (mLearning)?', asks Clark Quinn (2000) in 'Line Zine'. His answer is: 'It's elearning through mobile computational devices: Palms, Windows CE machines, even your digital cell phone.'. Accordingly, mLearning is defined with the terms of ICT. When we try to understand mLearning from the perspective of educational theory, technology-based definition is obviously not sufficient. However, it is interesting to try to benefit from the technological perspective. What kind of words we can associate with mobile technology? First, 'portable', which means that we can carry those devices that we call mobile. Second, wireless, i.e. there are not wires in the equipment. These two aspects: 1) some device is so light that you carry it, and 2) there are not wires in the device, are not from educational point of view very interesting. In stead, we could try to find out something educationally interesting in the third aspect: 3) we are moving when using technology. In other words, the very 'mobility'. When we further consider the mobility aspect we can ask: 'Who is moving and why are they moving'? From 'why' we later get the question 'where'. Let us think about 'why', first. There are two explanations. First, the reason of moving is irrelevant regarding to learning and teaching. A person just happens to be moving while conducting educational activities. It deals with **convenience**: rational time management and other such things. In this sense, mobility does not look like interesting from the pedagogical point of view. However, it gains some pedagogical relevance when we add to the explanation that a person, a student or a teacher, is moving because it is possible for him or her to be moving and simultaneously conduct educational activities like studying and teaching. We come to this aspect later in this article. Second, we can assume that a person is on the move in some particular place or places which is/are relevant regarding to subject that is being taught or that is under the study. We may call this the perspective of **expediency**. We can also argue that the first of these two explanations is the perspective of receiver while the second is that of producer.

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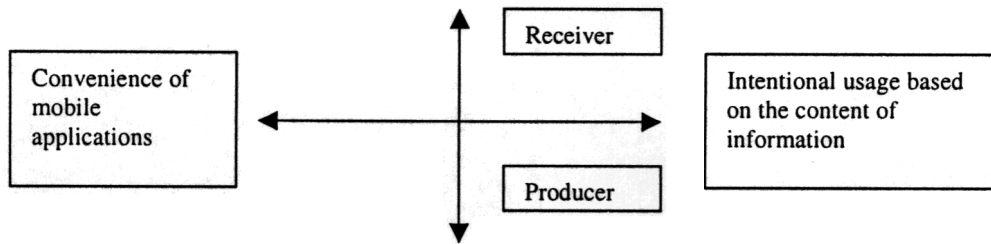


Figure 1. The perspectives of convenience, expediency, receiver and producer.

We can also ask, who is moving? There are several possibilities. First, naturally, a student and a teacher come to our mind. Further, it may be an outside expert or, interestingly, it may also be someone or something that is the object of studying and teaching (for example, some animal in the studies of zoology). One or two of these possible parties may be moving or, perhaps, they all are in the move. At least for the student and the teacher both convenience perspective and the expediency perspective are true. Finally, we can pose the question: 'where are they moving'? Regarding to the convenience perspective, 'where' is not important. However, we can consider this perspective from the point of view of higher education concerning the relationship between university and the surrounding society. The walls of the university become permeable. Work – leisure, university – home (or, regarding to mobility, way to work/way to home) and the public – the private, blend. We may call this relationship as a convenience relationship between university and its surroundings where people carry out their activities. When regarded from the expediency perspective, the relationship between university and the entire society can be described with expressions like 'the university as a part of the society' and 'the surrounding society as a part of the university'.

THE FIRST STAGE OF THE PROJECT

At the first stage of the UniWap project, in the academic year 2000-2001, a group of university teachers were selected as a pilot mobile group to complete their in-service training. The course focuses on educational use of ICT and it is provided by the Educational Centre for ICT. The students (i.e. university teachers) conduct their studies in teams of 2 to 4 persons and the aim is to design and to realise a subtask which is related to their own teaching. Their efforts are supported by a mentor. The first group of 14 persons was established in February 2001. Nine students were provided with Nokia Communicators 9110i and the rest with Nokia 6210 WAP mobile phones. The training includes face-to-face meetings, WebCT environment and mobile studying. In addition, the pilot group has its own web pages which are mostly used for informational purposes. These different elements associate with particular forms of network-based studying, each of them supporting in their own way the subtasks that the students are working with.

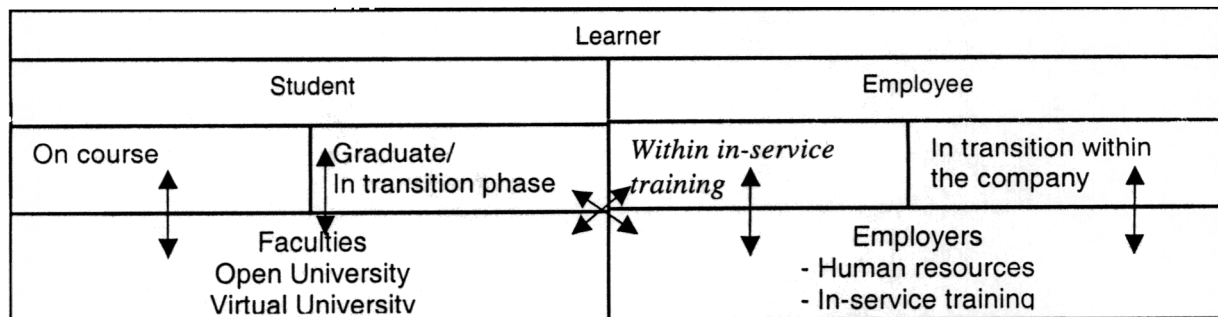
According to the mentor, the benefits of mobility at this first stage have appeared as a special possibility to support the students. Between the face-to-face meetings the mentor has given instructions through technology according to the actual situation of students' subtasks. For students, the mobile technology has enabled immediate writing of short messages in order to process their learning experiences to be added in their studying portfolio. These activities have been possible even if both the mentor and the students often move between different places, including different campuses, during their work days.

CONTEXTS FOR THE MOBILE APPLICATIONS

According to the current Finnish national strategy for education, training and research in the information society, the networking society, and the economy introduce new ways of organizing education and transmitting cultural values. The production of new teaching material and the

opening of new distribution channels require considerable structural and legislative reforms, the training of actors, and cooperation between the public and private sectors. The system of higher education degrees will be developed to correspond to the needs of working life and the principle of lifelong learning and lifelong guidance. This promotes also new contexts for mobile technical applications.

The students can be described as active consumers of learning opportunities. The universities are producing learning environments. There are also learners in the labor market. Thus, the contexts for mobile technical applications can be found in many settings between the universities and the labor market (Figure 2.).



↕ = Contexts for mobile technical applications

Figure 2. Contexts for mobile technical applications

The contexts for pilot projects in university settings can be found in various situations in which information is needed for urgent decision-making or the mobility promotes high-level convenience for the user. Also, enterprises can utilize same type applications when the employees want to achieve new qualifications or new tasks within the company. The information can be related to in-service training courses at the universities or new career opportunities within the company.

CONCLUSION

The University of Helsinki began to experiment with educational use of mobile technology even as early as 1997 in the form of school network projects (Nummi et al., 1998). Today these first steps appear as a reaction to weak signals of something that in the present educational world could be called mLearning. In this article we discussed mLearning as an educational concept. Further, we have reported a current project, the UniWap, in which mobile technology is utilized and experimented with regarding to the needs of students and faculty in higher education. We also introduced some possible application contexts concerning settings between university and labour market. The UniWap project is in its first, promising stage. The practice as well as theoretical elaboration provide a challenging field for both technologists and educationalists to develop mLearning.

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