

Workshop Proceedings

Ethical Issues in Mobile Learning Workshop

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Abstract

This discussion based workshop was intended to address the ethical concerns that should first be considered when a teacher or a researcher designs or investigates any learning opportunity that involves their access to personal information such as that stored on a personal handheld device, or that can be captured through the tools available on such devices. Such information often subsumes home and work or school or college contexts and may well provide more detail of the participating learner's activities and behaviour that even they are aware of. The workshop, organized at the behest of the International Association of Mobile Learning will go behind the school teacher's role 'in loco parentis' and the research associations' published codes of conduct to address questions such as what do privacy and informed consent now mean to participants, whether in their virtual life or in the real world and how should teachers and researchers respect it. Issues such as the ease with which photographs can be captured, transferred, transformed and published and who owns them where will also be debated.

The workshop, started with introductory presentations from its programme committee of three leading academics in the field. These were intended to raise workshop participants' awareness of ethical issues regularly arising in mobile learning research and teaching and to stimulate discussion. All participants then worked towards the creation of resource materials for teachers and researchers to use to inform themselves about ethical issues relevant to employing or studying mobile learning activities. It was decided that these should take the form of exemplar scenarios with associated questions for consideration. Once created, these will be made freely available from the IAMLearn website <http://www.iamlearn.org/>.

1. Why ethical issues in researching mobile learning are a concern.

Dr Jocelyn Wishart, Graduate School of Education, University of Bristol, UK.

Ethical issues in researching mobile learning are a concern as:

- handheld devices provide multiple opportunities for access to personal information including images;
- their portability creates issues with boundaries;
- they link to both real and virtual contexts and
- the full range of their capabilities are often poorly understood.

In addition, the classic approach of adhering to a fixed code of conduct or having your proposed methods first evaluated by an ethics committee does not deal well with the changing contexts that so often arise in mobile learning research.

What if we go back to first principles? That is to say look back to the principles and frameworks that inform our codes of conduct e.g. the British and American Educational Research Associations' ethical guidelines.

- Duty ethics arise from an absolute set of values that apply in all circumstances (the ten commandments, a professional association’s code of conduct).
- Consequentialist ethics arise from the belief that there are no absolutes, and that the likely outcomes in any situation should be calculated (cost-benefit or risk-benefit analysis).
- There are four primary ethical principles that have become commonly accepted:
 - Do good
 - Avoid harm
 - Autonomy
 - Justice (equal access to resource).

These four principles can be used to frame the six key areas of concern in mobile learning (Wishart, 2009):

	Do good	Avoid harm	Autonomy	Justice / Equal access
Personal information				
Images				
Informed consent				
Ownership				
Data storage and protection				
User generated content				

Researchers trialling the above framework report that not all cells are relevant, it depends on nature of the project, however, using the framework enables them to consider ethical issues in a more mindful way than say, running through a checklist, and, in particular, considering the question of aiming to do good ie how can participation in the research benefit the participants was felt to be novel and useful.

2. Ethical questions associated with mobile learning research in developing countries.

Professor John Traxler, Director of the Learning Lab, University of Wolverhampton, UK.

Communication technologies allow us to take mobile learning opportunities to and to research distant and different communities. Ethics principles like the above may be valid for communities and individuals 'like' us but not for distant or different communities are not. Who should decide what constitutes 'harm'? Or what methods of data collection, analysis and sharing are appropriate?

What about our views of learning and education? Once educated, learners are different people; they have joined different communities and cultures. How do we account for this and what does it mean for informed consent? Is consent an event or a process?

We need to be aware that cyberspace (now phonespace) supports new communities with their own ideas about what's appropriate, acceptable ways to interact and language to use as well as different and multiple identities.

Foundations, funders, corporations who see mobiles as delivering their mission to help 'less fortunate' others do not usually have formal ethics procedures. They do have a drive to scale (that is mass produce) and a pervasive technology hence present greater risk to fragile communities. Also what about communities where informed consent may be difficult to reconcile with an untroubled ignorance and where consent may be collective not individual?

Conventional ethics procedures, whether conceived of as consequentialist or deontological, are implemented in universities by committees prior to research taking place and based on the informed consent of individuals but mobile technologies and their social appropriation are complex, abstract and fluid. In particular, unexpected consequences so characteristic of international development make ethical choices even more problematic

3. Teacher concerns in respect of mobile learning and ethical questions

Dr Trish Andrews, Teaching and Educational Development Institute, University of Queensland, Australia.

Teachers and lecturers are recognising the power for learning and the spontaneity of mobile learning opportunities of asking students to be co-researchers, both capturing moments and using them to indicate what learning they felt was occurring in that moment. (Aubussen et al, 2009)

However, there are clashes linked to the rapid development of the technology compared to the more gradual evolution of rules governing its use (Castells et al., 2007). For example, mobile devices in the hands of students can be seen as subversive and illicit tools (Hartnell-Young & Heym, 2008). Untested technologies and bad cyber behaviour lead to educational institutions banning rather than exploring their use. Other areas of concern include cyberbullying, the potential for public dissemination of information originally intended for a limited audience, the ease and speed with which digital materials can be shared compared to older non-digital artefacts, the risk of unethical use of archived materials and levels of parental and student consent to recording classroom activity.

Teachers in particular are constrained by their 'duty of care' the obligation to do 'everything reasonably practicable to protect others from foreseeable harm' or even risk of harm. Issues arise with mobile devices as to what is 'foreseeable'?

Is banning really an answer? It doesn't acknowledge the way in which mobile devices are being increasingly integrated into everyday activities and can impact negatively on disadvantaged groups who may gain considerable advantage from mLearning. Any consideration of the ethics of m-learning must acknowledge the need for a positive ethic of inclusion and personal responsibility, not just harm minimization (Dyson, Andrews, Smyth & Wallace, in press).

In conclusion, we need to:

- prepare teachers. The ACMA Cybersmart Pre-Service Teacher program provides a whole range of strategies and resources for young graduate teachers to actually come into schools and be fully equipped on how to deal with cyber safety issues. In particular we cover things like cyberbullying, inappropriate use of technology, inappropriate images that are posted online, safe use of social networking, emerging trends that children are being exposed to and of course we cover the legal situation as well
http://www.acma.gov.au/interforms/Cybersmart%20videos/Teachers_resources/timed_text.xml;
- encourage responsible use of mobile devices – different strategies for different age groups? See <http://www.easternflourieu.sa.edu.au/index.php/policiesadministrator/146-policysmobilephone>.

4. Generating ethical issues from participants' experience and research

Following the introductory presentations participants discussed the ideas presented and their own research in small groups. During this discussion an extensive list of areas that were associated with ethical questions that need to be addressed when embarking on research into mobile learning was generated.

- Anonymity – complex to preserve, not always wanted by participants in a culture of self-publishing on the web where digital identity is important
- Protocols for including/not including data stored on the mobile device that may inform the research goals
- Relevant legislation e.g. school rules about mobile phone use, child protection laws
- Invited participants- ability for learners to invite others into activities that may not be part of institutional group
- Developing understanding of what ethical concerns mean in particular cultures and contexts
- Transparency in collecting and using data
- Training for participants in and checking their awareness of mobile device functionality
- Taking an iterative and interactive approach rather than relying on one-off initial approval
- Author rights and ownership of data, of images, of blogged text etc.
- Walled community vs open connectivity
- Device updates bringing new functions with them
- Loan vs Own
- Sustainability
- Personal ethics
- Nature of sponsor and what else they fund
- How voluntary is voluntary – power relationships
- Locked functions (who decides what participants should and shouldn't have access to)
- Logging – personal record, location, necessary for triangulation
- Participants' understanding and how this affects informed consent
- Researcher 'at a distance' i.e. removed from participants
- Who owns data e.g. medical records (the state, the healthcare authority, the individual) and where is it stored?
- Unexpected consequences of complexity, making disclosure of interim findings important
- Pro-adoption bias
- Research ethics vs teaching ethics

5. Selection of key concerns specific to mobile learning for scenario development

The following were selected from the above list as key concerns to be put forward for associated scenario development:

- a) **Boundaries** between formal-informal, public-private, home-school, real-virtual etc
- b) **Anonymity** \leftrightarrow respecting desire to self-publish
- c) **Accessibility** - people who are differently able / less educated /come from different cultures etc. and what this means regarding costs e.g. for devices, to access internet
- d) **Ownership** - whose data is on the mobile or on the server, who owns it, what about images? Is the owner the person taking the picture or is it the person in the picture
- e) Participants' **awareness** of device capabilities, what data is being logged etc
- f) **Risk analysis** - the unexpected consequences of complexity

The last two both imply the need to take your participants' ethical approval at stages throughout the project and not just at the start.

The scenarios are currently being developed; each will comprise a short description of a potential mobile learning research activity and a set of questions for researchers to consider how they will answer before embarking on similar projects. They will be available from the website of the International Association of Mobile Learning (IAMLEarn) at <http://www.iamlearn.org/> in early 2013.

List of References

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