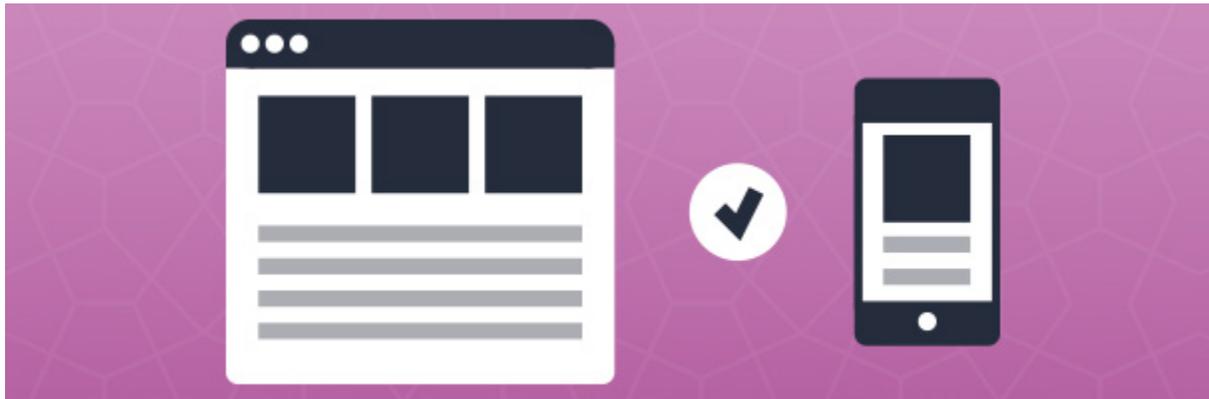# Distilling Existing Content for Mobile (May 14)

by Paul Clothier

May 28, 2014

 "It's not always a good idea to adapt your existing content for mobile. Avoid it if you can, and create mLearning from scratch that supports what you already have. But if you must—then these guidelines should keep you in good stead."

For many companies the first step towards mLearning seems to be adapting existing eLearning content for mobile use. Moving eLearning courses onto smartphones is not the best approach for mLearning—the context for using mobile content is very different. *(See "Right Time and Place: mLearning Use Cases" in the Related Articles listed at the end of this article.)*

Better uses of mLearning are as performance support or as content to supplement your existing ILT and eLearning. However, given that many companies are committed to re-using or re-purposing existing eLearning content—I thought it timely to at least provide some guidelines, tips, and caveats.

Just to be clear, I won't be talking about technologies, tools, or how to implement a particular solution. I'll simply be talking about guidelines for designing good mLearning. My definition of mLearning is, "Learning on a device you carry around with you most of the day." I will focus on touch-screen smartphones—not tablets. Tablets might seem similar in many ways but they have a very different use case than smartphones—closer to that of a laptop experience than to a smartphone.

Tip 1: Resist

The first tip is to not do it if you really don't have to. mLearning works best when you design it for a specific purpose and context—not simply when management asks you to "create some mobile content" or to give "anywhere, anytime" access to existing training or learning content, thinking this will somehow provide effective learning. This is like giving someone Wikipedia access instead of sending them to college.

Tip 2: Supplement, don't replace

Before you commit to converting existing content for use on a smartphone, I encourage you to think of ways in which your mobile content can supplement or support the content you already have. Think how types of mobile learning or mobile content could add value to the classroom instructor-led training, the virtual-classroom instructor-led training, and the eLearning you already have—rather than to simply be a

smaller version of existing content. Think about delivering mobile content to help your learners review, use as a quick reference, as support for specific tasks, for taking short quizzes, or for learning games.

Tip 3: Chunk your content

Distill your existing content into smaller, digestible chunks. You might currently have one ten-or-fifteen-minute module—you may need to break these into five two-or-three-minute modules or sections—so that each one addresses an idea, concept, or procedure. Study the content—how can you divide it into meaningful self-contained sections.

Try to have one idea per sentence or paragraph. Consider using bulleted lists where appropriate instead of sentences. Think in terms of short "learning bites."

Tip 4: Use portrait orientation

Don't assume your existing eLearning or ILT landscape orientation will work for a smartphone—even if your users can turn it sideways. You want them to access the content quickly and in the same manner they access most other content on their mobile device—in portrait mode.

This means redesign. You now have a portrait canvas to work with. The only time you may wish to consider landscape is when you have a game—where having two available thumbs is advantageous—or a video, where users are familiar with viewing in that orientation.

Tip 5: Cut to the chase

Reduce the amount of text. Get to the point quickly. No fluffy intros. Create mockups of your users' screens and try out the text size and content. (I usually create a PDF from a PPT of the correct screen-aspect ratio, write text in an appropriately large font, email it to myself, and open it on one of my target phones to see what it will look like.) Avoid using the auto-text-size feature—you want to accurately design the layout of a screen, not have it change. Will you have combined text and graphics on the same screen? How much text can you get on one screen that is easily readable for your target audience? How much text if you have a graphic? Have a smaller margin between the edge of your text and the edge of the phone screen.

Tip 6: Redesign graphics

Redesign your graphics for a small screen. Don't use existing eLearning or ILT graphics and simply reduce the size for mobile. The detail you can see in an eLearning graphic will disappear on mobile. If the user has to pinch zoom a graphic you'll slow them down—apart from annoying them. This means deconstructing diagrams. You may have many elements in the existing graphic. Try to reduce the number or just show the salient information. What was a single graphic may need conversion into two or three.

One approach to providing more information in a graphic is to tap on the graphic element and have a popup or overlay that shows more detail within that element.

Tip 7: Simplify animations and interactions

Animations are useful in eLearning modules to grab attention or clarify a process or idea. You can use interactions to engage learners. With mobile you don't have to work so hard to get a learner's attention—if they pick up the device you already have it—albeit for a short time.

Keep animations and user interactions to a minimum on mobile unless you have a very good reason for including them. The screen may be in motion and smaller animations will be difficult to see. Simple

interactions like tap, swipe, or drag are fine for quizzing but don't overuse them in content. Avoid having the user enter any text in your mLearning—unless it's to login—it's too time consuming and error prone on a small keyboard. When you develop interactions be keenly aware of how your users may be holding the device—make it easy for them to interact one-handed.

Tip 8: Redesign navigation and user interface

You need to redesign the navigation and the user interface. You need to adapt the size, placement, and arrangement of navigation elements to work well on a small screen. Try to design navigation with the assumption that learners will be using the device with one hand—especially for performance-support content.

Keep navigation simple and intuitive. Make sure it's very easy to access the content quickly. You don't want five taps before you can start reading, listening, or viewing. Have automatic bookmarking so that the user always comes back to where they left off. Have an easily accessible main menu or table of contents. Increase the relative size of buttons or controls—they need to be big enough for thumbs or fingers.

Get the user interface out of the way. Reduce the amount of user interface "chrome" so the content is always front and center. A good approach is to have navigation elements that only appear when you tap the screen—so you get to use the whole screen for your content.

Don't stick with the same navigation as your eLearning—use gestures that are typical on a smartphone: swipe, tap, drag, shake, etc.

Tip 9: Consider context for video and audio

If you are using existing videos think carefully about their appropriateness for mobile consumption. Consider the context of how the learner will use the video or audio narration. Video is not always the best method to provide quick access to learning or information on a mobile device. The user has to be relatively static to view video and has to be in a quiet environment to listen to a video or audio narration without headphones. And if you intend the user to wear headphones—how convenient will this be to your target audience if they're on the move?

If you can, add the option of closed captions for videos or narration. If you re-purpose existing video then edit into smaller, meaningful chunks of one or two minutes.

Tip 10: Get your users' input

Don't forget—one of the most important parts of distilling your content is to get feedback and input from your target audience—both before you redesign the content and after you have your first prototype. You may have good insight, but I guarantee there will be a few essentials you might overlook.

As I said earlier—it's not always a good idea to adapt your existing content for mobile. Avoid it if you can, and create mLearning from scratch that supports what you already have. But if you must—then these guidelines should keep you in good stead.

Learning Solutions Magazine, ©2014 eLearning Guild