

Mobile Technologies and Social Learning (Sep 15)



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A quick look around your workplace (or even the grocery store) tells you that most of us are always connected. Internet and mobile communication technologies are everywhere. It’s now possible for us to connect to information (and to other people) in ways unimaginable only a few decades ago.

New technologies have led us not only to adjust our expectations about personal life, but more recently and equally dramatically to change the ways we work. Many of us can do our work just about anywhere, and at any time. And sometimes—for better or worse—employers expect us to stay connected to the workplace almost 24/7.

We’re more “social”

Social networking tools (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and the like) keep us connected to friends, colleagues, clients, and often, total strangers. We share a lot of information about ourselves and our activities (or at least we have the potential to), and we learn a lot from what others share. Informal learning has always been an important part of human development, and with the power of technology the potential for continual learning is magnified.

Social learning and mobile technology

As learning and development professionals, how do we harness this potential? We know that the use of mobile technologies for learning is on the rise. Training is no longer just sitting in a classroom or at a desktop computer. Professionals on the move need the right information, at the right time, and in the right place. They need just-in-time performance support, micro-learning nuggets, and interaction with peers and mentors. And we, as instructional designers, must be prepared to meet these needs.

We know that adult learners bring unique challenges to the learning environment. Let's be honest, we deal with not only our work responsibilities, but also our family commitments, community activities, and so forth. Typically, we have little time to pursue formal learning. Adult learners also need the "What's in it for me?" and "How do I get it now?" questions answered—learning must be relevant to their careers and personal interests.

We also know that we learn best together, through collaboration with peers, discussion with mentors, and by sharing our knowledge and experiences with others. Mobile technology is a particularly powerful tool for enabling and facilitating the power of social learning.

And, to bring it down to the bottom line, we know that learning in the workplace is driven by considerations of time and efficiency. Training is time-consuming and expensive to develop and administer. Employers want to minimize the amount of time spent in training, while employees want the time they spend in training to be short and of immediate value.

So ... what are we waiting for?

Mobile solutions

How can we use technology to support mobile, social learning? Often in mobile learning, the traditional WBT-type course may not be the ideal solution. No one is going to page through a 100-page course on a smartphone (though they might on a tablet), and none of us would really enjoy that. The most effective use of mobile learning is typically just-in-time training or performance support, such as brief video snippets, checklists, and reference tools.

Whether we work for a financial services company, run a high school, lead a sales team, take care of newborns in a hospital—whatever we might do, just about all of us have a smart phone in our pocket and we fire it up when we need to know something.

The question isn't whether mobile or social learning is for your learners. The questions are "What do your learners need to know on the go?" and "How do you deliver it to them?" A key component of addressing these issues is the tools available for creating and delivering mobile content.

Mobile technology is open technology

What do you use to develop mobile courses and support tools?

In the old days (by which we mean about five years ago), your answer might have been Flash. And at the time, Flash was what most of us used. Just about every online course we developed relied on Flash to provide interactive content. It was (and still is) a solid tool for eLearning development.

Today, however, the writing is on the wall for Flash, driven in large part by Apple's decision to stop supporting it in favor of HTML5. And the reasons for adopting HTML5 are sound. Flash is a proprietary, closed system. HTML5 is an open standard that everyone can use, free of charge. Flash is not touch-friendly; it was designed for using mice on PCs, not for using fingers on touch screens.

What we need in a BYOD (bring your own devices) work culture are open web standards and technologies that work seamlessly across a wide spectrum of devices. A critical piece of the puzzle is finding content-authoring tools that output native HTML5. Here the choices are a mixed bag. Some tools output mobile content that requires the learner to install a software plugin. Other tools can output to mobile but are complicated to use. Still other tools are focused on app creation rather than specifically on learning content development.

Tracking mobile learning

And what about the SCORM-driven LMS? We still need to manage learning records, of course, but the way we do that needs to adapt to changing tools and expectations as well. The answer, as with Flash, is open protocols and technology.

The “mobile SCORM” to which LMS vendors are moving are the xAPI and cmi5 standards, which extend SCORM to support mobile applications. One limitation of SCORM is that content must be on the same domain as the LMS. With xAPI, content can be anywhere on a Content Distribution Network (CDN), not just on the LMS. xAPI does not actually require an LMS; data can also be recorded in a stand-alone Learning Record Store (LRS). LRSs will be supported by third-party suppliers (much like [OpenID](#) identity providers currently do). Someday, we’ll all have our own LRS that is portable, and so not tied to a specific organization’s LMS. Your transcript will travel!

With xAPI and CMI-5, you can record learning wherever it happens, including events outside the course (for example, you can record a viewing-a-YouTube-video event). The possibilities for data collection and analytics are almost limitless.

How do you get started?

In this article, I have very briefly highlighted some key considerations for adopting mobile. If you want to dive into mobile, what are your next steps? Here are some suggestions:

1. **Analyze for mobile.** Along with your usual analysis tasks, add questions related to mobile: What does the typical employee in your industry do? Do they travel, or are they mostly in the office? What mobile devices do they use? Android, iOS, or a combination? Answers to these questions will inform your decisions about whether mobile learning is appropriate, and if so, what development or deployment tools to use.
2. **Review solutions.** As we mentioned earlier, mobile isn’t appropriate for all situations. Perhaps your sales team needs refresher training on product demos. In this case, a mobile tool with video snippets might be enough. If your learners are on the road most of the time, perhaps micro-learning mini-courses could be the answer.
3. **Learn the technology.** Developing for mobile requires changes in the tools we use. Learn more about HTML5, available mobile authoring tools, and deployment strategies. See the following links to get you started.

Resources

Here are a few authoring tools to consider. The tool you select will, of course, depend on your budget, existing toolset, and other constraints.

- [gomo learning](#)
- [Claro \(Joe Ganci’s review\)](#)
- [Obsidian Black](#)
- [Articulate Storyline \(Joe Ganci’s review\)](#)
- [Adobe Captivate \(Joe Ganci’s review\)](#)

Here are some references to help you learn more about HTML5 and mobile content deployment.

- [Dive Into HTML5](#)
- For information on implementing xAPI and CMI-5, see [this article](#) from [RISC](#) ([update here](#))
- From [Float Learning](#), here’s a fun little [interactive piece](#) that shows how xAPI/CMI-5 could work in practice

- Float has also published [several articles on xAPI](#)
- Even more information about using xAPI from *Learning Solutions Magazine* and The eLearning Guild, here's a [list](#)

For detailed information on the xAPI standard, here's [the latest xAPI spec](#).

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