



United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

UNESCO Mobile Learning Week Symposium Report



Introduction

Building on its commitment to better understand the possibilities as well as the challenges of mobile learning, UNESCO hosted a second Mobile Learning Week Symposium from Feb. 18 to 19 in Paris, France. This event was supported by UNESCO's partners, Nokia and Microsoft, and sponsored by GSMA, Huawei, and Alcatel Lucent. A Walking Gallery complemented the Symposium. It gave various stakeholders—from governments to NGOs to private companies—a venue to exhibit and share their work.

The Symposium was a central component of the broader Mobile Learning Week. It was followed by a successful Senior Policy Makers' Forum, co-organized with the GSMA, on Feb. 20 and a series of well-attended webinars hosted from Feb. 21 to 22. UNESCO is pleased to announce that it will be organizing a third Mobile Learning Week in 2014. The tentative dates for this flagship event are Feb. 17 to 21.

The 2013 Symposium was well attended. Nearly 325 participants came from over 45 countries to explore how mobile technology can be utilized to expand and enrich learning opportunities for all. These figures reflect impressive growth: compared with the first Mobile Learning Week Symposium held in December 2011, there were three times as many individual participants and the number of countries represented also increased by a factor of three. The turnout signals that the stature and prominence of mobile learning is growing within the international education community as is UNESCO's leadership in this area.

Whereas the first UNESCO Mobile Learning Week Symposium examined how mobile phones, given their ubiquity, can further education, the second Symposium embraced a broader definition of mobile technology. Given the needs of Member States, UNESCO's work now encompasses tablet computers, devices that are increasingly being provisioned by governments to school students. UNESCO supports a flexible definition of mobile devices and mobile learning. This stance allows the Organization to better account for fast-changing technological and pedagogical innovations and to study mobile learning as a development with implications for formal as well as informal learning. A widely shared finding from the Symposium is that mobile learning is poised to blur lines between formal and informal learning, creating bridges between the two. Thus, a panoptic approach—both toward devices and learning—is advisable.

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In keeping with the theme of the event, Mobile Learning Week participants used their personal mobile devices to comment on Symposium sessions, access UNESCO publications and view a detailed program of activities. UNESCO built a dedicated mobile application to support the Symposium and it was downloaded by most participants. The MLW2013 hash-tag reached close to 300,000 Twitter accounts.

Cumulatively, the event affirmed UNESCO's leadership in a vital, if still-nascent, area of education which is likely to grow in importance as technology continues to play a larger role in teaching and learning. The Symposium continues to be instrumental in pushing mobile learning to the forefront of the international education agenda. It provides key stakeholders—including representatives from government, civil society, non-profit organizations, and private companies—a deeper understanding of how mobile devices can be leveraged to support literacy development, improve the quality of education, and extend new learning opportunities to women and girls as well as men and boys. Special focus was given to how mobile learning can help ameliorate existing educational divides and provide opportunities to learners living in resource-poor areas.

At the core of the Symposium were three questions, all anchored in Education for All Goals. The questions were:

1. How can mobile technologies support literacy development for children and adults?
2. How can mobile technologies support teachers and their professional development in order to improve the quality of education delivered to students?
3. How can mobile technologies support gender equality in education and extend opportunities to women and girls in particular?

Participants deliberated these questions during keynote speeches, panel discussions, and nearly 50 breakout presentations given by speakers from around the world. The Symposium also allowed UNESCO to launch its most important mobile learning publication to date: [The Policy Guidelines for Mobile Learning](#). Drawing on almost two years of research, input from specialists in diverse fields, and contributions from over 20 UNESCO Member States, the *Guidelines* provide practical advice to policy makers seeking to transform increasingly ubiquitous and affordable mobile devices into tools for learning. Existing policies have very little to say when it comes to questions of whether and, more crucially, *how* to incorporate mobile technology into education. The flagship UNESCO publication helps fill this void and the policy recommendations were commended by Symposium participants.

The remainder of this Report aims to highlight the most significant findings and issues that surfaced during the two-day Symposium.

Literacy

A number of Symposium participants remarked that the world—and the developing world in particular—is book-poor but mobile device-rich. Data suggests that this maxim is valid: studies reveal that in poor countries there is, on average, just one book to every 19 children. Book shortages confront developed countries as well. Surveys conducted in the United Kingdom reveal that one in every three children in the country do not have a single book in their home. Increasingly however, people do have access to a working mobile device, even people living in areas of extreme poverty. Data from the ITU indicates that there are over 6 billion mobile subscriptions worldwide and over a billion in Africa alone. A consensus emerged at the Symposium that mobile devices must be enlisted in the fight to irradiate illiteracy. Mobile phones and tablets are the first ICT that can realistically be used to reach the large numbers of people who are illiterate or neo-literate and living in areas where access to traditional educational resources is unreliable. According to the UNESCO Institute for Statistics there are currently 775 million illiterate adults on the planet and two-thirds of them are women.

A number of Symposium sessions illuminated how mobile technologies can support literacy development. The need for local language support was voiced as was the importance of combining mobile learning interventions with face-to-face classes whenever possible. Given that the majority of illiterate adults are women, several participants underscored the importance of making mobile learning content relevant to females and specific to the contexts in which they live and work. A number of literacy specialists said that mobile devices by presenting small bits of information at regular intervals can help ensure illiterate learners are not overwhelmed or intimidated. The privacy afforded by mobile learning can also help remove some of the stigma commonly associated with illiteracy. A mobile device, whether a phone or tablet computer, allows users a personal space to improve and practice emergent reading and writing skills. Finally, Symposium participants—through demonstrations of mobile learning applications and scholarly talks—announced that the functional capabilities of mobile devices are, in many regards, uniquely suited to help illiterate people. Various mobile learning program managers showed how simple voice calls can be used in conjunction with SMS text messages to teach elementary reading and writing. With robust connectivity, screens that display text, speakers, microphones, and, more recently, cameras, mobile devices are versatile tools capable of promoting literacy development.

Content

Although many communities and countries enjoy a robust mobile infrastructure, there is not enough high-quality and local-language content that takes advantage of the unique affordances of mobile devices. For example, a large number of applications present students with drills and quizzes but far fewer promote situated learning, build lasting bridges between in-school and out-of-school learning, and support interactive communities of learners in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. It is the job of education specialists to figure out mobile device—the ones we use every day as well as those to be designed in the future—can further and deepen the educations of learners everywhere. Governments should likely provide a spark of some sort, by incentivizing the creation of outstanding mobile learning content and building sustainable frameworks—acceptable to students and developers—that nurture

innovation. They also have a role to play in ensuring that local-language content is developed, as well as content which is relevant to those with special needs. UNESCO recommends that countries explore the possibility of building or advocating for open education resources. These freely accessible resources will help ensure learning opportunities are open to all students, not just those of means. Additionally, policy-makers and educators should insist on platform and device agnostic content, while simultaneously taking advantage of opportunities offered by new hardware and software.

Teachers

Teachers will be a pillar of mobile learning models both now and in the future. As representatives from Microsoft and Nokia articulated during a panel discussion, “nothing ever lands in education without teachers.” Mobile learning does not replace teachers but supplements and empowers them, allowing them to do a difficult job better and reach more learners in more effective ways. How to do this is not self-evident. It requires extensive training and continued professional development. Teaching in any situation is a complex act and asking teachers to use technology to improve or transform their pedagogy is harder still. Therefore, it is the task of mobile learning specialists to show teachers how mobile technology can improve the quality and rigor of education. Teachers need professional development to understand, embrace and then implement successful interventions. Technology—and perhaps mobile learning in particular—requires re-conceptualizing the role of the teacher and models of pre- and in-service training. Many Symposium participants said that technology represents an avenue to re-establish the professionalism of teaching.

Far from being purely theoretical, several participants shared how mobile devices are being deployed to support teachers working in a variety of different contexts. UNESCO was pleased to share information about the mobile learning projects it is running in Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, and Senegal to build the capacity of teachers. By design, each project employs a distinct approach. For example, the project in Senegal trains teachers how to utilize a mobile application that allows students to practice mathematical concepts, and the project in Mexico builds the Spanish language skills of teachers working in areas where indigenous languages are dominant. Results from these groundbreaking projects, funded with support from Nokia, will be shared at Mobile Learning Week 2014.

Gender

Serious concern was voiced that women and girls continue to be excluded from education and that gender equality, as defined by Education for All, is still a long way off. A number of projects demonstrated that mobile learning offers a vehicle to provide educational opportunities to students that have not traditionally been reached, whether because of gender, economic circumstances, cultural barriers, ethnicity, or a combination of these factors. Yet, despite this promise, women use ICTs less than men and in many communities there are taboos surrounding mobile device ownership and use by

females. For this reason it is not sufficient for program designers and implementers to look at gender as a box to be checked. Instead a gender perspective should be embedded in programs at all stages.

Projects need to consider how the context, content and language of interventions will be useful to women. Learning resources—in any medium, mobile included—are context and audience specific and all programs should be relevant to the beneficiaries they are targeting. Several participants noted the importance of informing all community members—men and women alike—about the benefits of a mobile program, especially those aimed at women and girls specifically. Community support is more likely to be achieved by building trust from the outset and ensuring transparency and inclusivity. UNESCO runs a dedicated program funded by the US State Department that examines how mobile technology can improve the literacy skills of women and girls. Later this year UNESCO will publish nine case studies that describe illustrative projects underway in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Arab States. UNESCO hopes that these case studies, which will be supplemented by two regional reviews (one from Africa and one from Asia) as well as a global comparative analysis report, will reveal a set of best practices that can inform and give impetus to future mobile learning projects targeting women and girls.

Superior Evaluation and Sustainability

Mobile learning is still in its infancy and models of best practice are, in many cases, foggy abstractions of potential and promise. Rare is the program—large or small—that backs claims of quality and success with hard, peer-reviewed data. A consensus emerged that initiatives require more rigorous evaluation. It was recommended that more projects allocate larger portions of their budgets to monitoring and evaluation and then sharing the results of these evaluations with others. A lot can be learned from failures as well as successes so it is important to look for both and decipher what, exactly, constitutes high quality mobile learning. Many Symposium participants voiced frustration that many projects—despite optimistic beginnings—never move out of the pilot phase and disappear when initial funding money is exhausted. A call was made for more projects to grow in scale. While a handful of exemplary initiatives have moved beyond the start-up phase to reach thousands or tens of thousands of learners, these examples are few and far between.

A central challenge to sustainability is the complex ecosystem of partners needed to support mobile learning projects. To be sure, mobile learning requires broader and more diverse ecosystems than those typically found in education; they must encompass not only the usual stakeholders such as content creators and publishers, but also companies that install telecommunications systems, mobile network operators and device manufacturers. Additionally, regulating agencies, which previously held little sway in education, become crucial players when a government or organization launches a large mobile learning initiative. As more and more countries roll-out mobile learning initiatives a body of evidence will emerge as to how to take programs to scale.

Government Perspectives

A particularly enlightening Symposium panel featured representatives from governments that have launched large-scale mobile learning projects, often provisioning tablet computers to tens of thousands of students. Officials from Thailand, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Uruguay, and Pakistan kindly shared the experiences of their respective countries. The representatives were insistent that ICT will continue to upend and, with careful oversight, improve traditional models of education. They also said that mobile devices—given their power and affordability—may be the first lasting integration of technology in education. Panelists spoke of the need for holistic solutions that consider learners, teachers, administrators, content creators and service providers, among others. They also said that strong leadership and shared objectives were key ingredients to successful initiatives. Many country representatives faced obstacles getting projects off the ground; they described pushback from teachers who are skeptical about moving away from traditional, textbook-based pedagogies as well as from parents who are worried that their children spend too much time looking at digital screens. To assuage these concerns, many governments made major investments in teacher training to ensure that instructors understand how to use mobile technologies to enrich their practice and maximize the unique benefits of new learning tools (these benefits are articulated at length in the *UNESCO Policy Guidelines for Mobile Learning*). While the panelists were cognizant that the road ahead will have bumps and pitfalls, they felt that, collectively, their countries are at the vanguard of education because they are pioneering strategies to more fully leverage technology for learning. UNESCO looks forward to hearing updates about these projects at the next Mobile Learning Week.

Mobile Learning Week 2014

Building on the momentum of the 2011 and 2013 Mobile Learning Week Symposiums, UNESCO is pleased to announce that it plans to host a third Symposium from Feb. 17 and 18 in 2014. This event will be part of Mobile Learning Week 2014 which is scheduled to run from Feb. 17 to Feb. 21, 2014. UNESCO is currently deliberating possible themes for this flagship event and welcomes suggestions. Please contact us at mlw@unesco.org.