

Mobile Learning: the iPodification of Universities.

By Tara Brabazon

Is it just me, or is *Time Magazine* (again) confusing popularity with populism, and social and economic injustice with empowered digitized ‘citizens’? Their 2006 ‘Person of the Year’ was represented through a mirrored cover. The award went to ‘You’ – or the similarly vacuous word that teachers remove from first year undergraduate papers – ‘Us.’ ‘We’ won through the user-generated content ‘movement.’ This ‘victory’ for ‘us’ could have been predicted. In May 2006, *Time* listed Jimmy Wales as one of the ‘100 people who shaped our world.’¹ While *Time* termed his activities ‘democratic,’ he corrected their enthusiasm. He described himself – rather than ‘us’ – as ‘anti-credentialist.’² The year 2006 will be remembered as a time when the mediocre, banal and self-confident discovered blogs, a medium through which they could no longer be ignored by the popular kids from high school, and grainy mobile phone footage of the embarrassing, humiliating and voyeuristic gained a new home – YouTube.

The pseudo-intellectual digi-literate found a confident label to justify the proliferation of irrelevances: Web 2.0. It is the active forgetting of Web 2.0 activists and critics that is the concern. ‘You’, ‘We’ and ‘Us’ are damaging words to use in web-based analyses. ‘Everyone’ is not online. ‘Everyone’ is not using online resources within the parameters specified by corporations, employers, governments and national laws. A far more useful approach – beyond the analogue ‘end of History’ - shapes a sociology of the web, asking who is using particular applications, how and why. For example not ‘everyone’ is downloading music. According to the British Phonographic Industry, 96 percent of the money spent on music downloads is derived from men, and nearly 40 percent of these men are aged between 35 and 44.³ How such a sociological profile will transform online shopping, the music charts and the acts signed to recording companies is yet to be fully revealed. The pretence that ‘everyone’ is part of the downloading ‘revolution’ is not only mistaken, but damaging to the primary site of investigation for this paper: online learning initiatives and strategies.

¹ C. Anderson, “Jimmy Wales,” *Time Magazine*, May 8, 2006, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1187286,00.html>, accessed on June 3, 2006

² Wales in Anderson, *ibid.*

³ These figures are reported by Lisa Bachelor in “Upbeat about downloading?” *The Observer*, May 1, 2005, p. 4

This article assesses the consequences of im/mobility for education, using as a trigger the removal of Open University broadcasts from the BBC. The University has replaced ‘static’ broadcasting on television with time and space shifting DVDs and podcasts. Such a switch offers a challenge to teachers and students to re/evaluate the consequences of placing attention on access and content, rather than motivation and context. The tropes that punctuate our learning lives are changing. The 1970s were about empowerment. The 1980s were about student-centred learning. The 1990s were about flexibility. The 2000s are about mobility. This paper, using the OU’s shift from broadcasting to podcasting as a guide, tracks the cost of replacing motivation with mobility in m-learning.

Moving from content to context

The confusion between delivery mechanisms and learning goals could not have emerged at a more unfortunate time. December 2006 saw the end of the Open University’s broadcasts on free-to-air television. Coursework is now sent out as DVDs or downloadable podcasts. The justification of this decision was that “all its 150,000 undergraduates now have access to the web.”⁴ Through such a statement, access is equated with literacy. Not mentioned in the affirmations of access is the 2006 report from the internet research firm Point Topic that located the ten highest regions for broadband density in London and the Home Counties. The ten lowest regions were in rural regions in Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland.⁵ Therefore ‘access’ to the web has different determinations not only technologically, but geographically.

Further, the OU’s focus on ‘students’ belies the impact of their broadcasting on those not (currently) enrolled in their programmes. The benefits of free educational materials screening in the lounge rooms without examinations, assessments or commitments, has been forgotten. The role of education in building an informed, questioning citizenship has been masked. While OU staff still operate as ‘experts’ for programmes such as *Coast*, their function in public education, through creating an interest and awareness of learning and ideas for those who may never ‘access’ a University podcast, was unmentioned as the University broadcasted its last session.

⁴ J. Jowit, “No more late-night particle physics as OU broadcasts last programme,” *The Observer*, December 10, 2006, p. 5.

⁵ Jamie Doward cites the Point Topic research in “We’re wired... but not connected,” *The Observer Special Report*, December 10, 2006, p. 1.

The Open University was formed in 1969. Its role in making education accessible was pivotal. Sally Crompton, head of the OU's Open Broadcasting Unit, marked the loss of broadcasting from their media portfolio while underestimating its wide-ranging value beyond the formal curriculum.

People understand it, for they have lived it, either as a former student, insomniac, night worker, or early channel surfers who had to get up, walk to the set and turn the channel selector between 1 and 3. They either took notes, stared at the eerie glow, mocked the presenters or were strangely drawn into a world of literature, art, physics, maths, or science.⁶

The question is how 'understood' or 'lived' education will transform now that broadcasting has been discarded as a learning platform. Broadcasting has particular advantages for community-based lifelong learning. While narrowcasting is useful when precise audiences/markets/students are defined, education to build citizenship cannot deploy unsubstantiated assumptions about digital access without profound costs and losses.

The great innovations of digitization are convergence and mobility, the capacity to move digital files with integrated visual and aural content through space. Through this expansive capacity, the key is to be precise in the determination of the goals and objectives within a learning event or moment rather than allowing the strengths of the technological platform to either limit or decenter educational aims. The 'long tail' may guide e-commerce discussions, but is less effective when evaluating the relationship between students and the media. Much formal education is outside informal community structures and systems. The OU's role in broadcasting was important because it permitted a range of quality engagements with learning: from fully enrolled students through to an interested late night watcher gaining a blast of new ideas from university scholars. The loss of this service, so easily relinquished for podcasting and DVD, may be a success of Web 2.0 but a failure of education for citizenship, surely best embedded – retrospectively – as a bedrock of Web 1.0.

The productive relationship between the BBC and the OU lasted as long as words like broadcasting and citizenship had currency over user-generated content and consumerism. Both education and public broadcasting have changed. The BBC strategy for the 360 degrees dispersal of content – that all their material should be moved onto all platforms - is difficult to justify for education. Does mobility of content facilitate learning and encourage motivation, or blunt the tight alignment of content and context,

⁶ S. Crompton in Jowit, p. 5.

motivation and time-specific media? The OU's strategy for audio cassettes was distinct from the current BBC strategy for sonic media. OU staff rarely moved lectures onto different platforms. Academics specifically recorded material for the cassettes and for television. Therefore, the multi-platform mobility of learning materials through the range of media has blunted a conscious reflection of how the media platform shapes and moulds content. In other words, instead of celebrating convergent i-lectures, webstreaming and podcasts – or m-learning – there must be more provisional questions about whether sonic materials should be moved through space and time, and how mobility impacts on student motivation. Two different responses to digitization and user-generated content have been offered as the BBC and the OU disconnected their relationship, with the BBC moving content through all platforms and the OU restricting the palette of media.

A pivotal choice for teachers and curriculum writers is not analogue versus digital, but synchronous versus asynchronous. The capacity to time shift media is the key to distance education. The Open University had a history of past innovations in this area. Gary Berg, in the 2001 edition of *WebNet* journal,⁷ stressed the Open University's three nodes of innovation in the history of education: high quality content, student support and a strong research base. He stated that, "rather than dismissing traditional media such as television, they appreciate the use of traditional media in educational environments."⁸ In avoiding the division between old and new media, mobility and immobility, technological platforms were chosen to suit learning goals, rather than allowing a fetishization with the new to trash the old.

One innovation underplayed by Berg was the special function of sound in education and the leadership of the OU in developing that proto-digital sonic literacy. A.W. Bates, in reviewing the historical successes of the Open University,⁹ explored the significance of media selection in distance education, including the history of audio cassettes for OU courses. He stated that, "Audio cassettes are low cost; all students already have facilities at home; they are easy for academics to produce, and cheap and simple to distribute; students find them convenient to use; and, when designed properly, they encourage student activity. (UK OU audio-cassettes are rarely lectures.)"¹⁰ There are lessons to be drawn from the Open University's use of audio cassettes. They were chosen because they were low cost, accessible, able to be

⁷ G. Berg, "The British Invasion." *WebNet Journal*, January-March 2001, pp. 5-6.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 6.

⁹ A.W. Bates, "Technology for distance education: A 10-year perspective," in A. Tait (ed.) *Key issues in open learning - a reader: An anthology from the journal 'Open learning' 1986-1992*, (Harlow: Longman, 1993), pp. 241-265.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, p. 242.

produced by academics without intervention from administrators or technicians, and convenient to use. Significantly, in terms of educational design, lectures were noted as inappropriate in developing effective sound-based OU educational strategies. The key imperative was that teaching technologies were inflected by other directives such as the student's home environment. Audio cassettes were cheap. Broadband, iPods and computers are not.

More detailed research is required on how particular courses and student cohorts require different media for distinct learning outcomes. Bates established a checklist of six criteria through which to assess educational technology.

Assessment of Educational Technology

Cost

Learning effectiveness

Availability to students

User friendliness

Place in the organizational environment

Recognition of international technological inequalities

Source: A.W. Bates, "Technology for distance education: A 10-year perspective," in A. Tait (ed.) *Key issues in open learning - a reader: An anthology from the journal 'Open learning' 1986-1992*, (Harlow: Longman, 1993), p. 243

Bates offered an important mechanism to evaluate technological choices, not only for distance education, but for all teaching and learning. The attention to 'effectiveness,' 'availability' and 'inequalities' is pivotal but underplayed within the quiet loss of broadcasting from options for educational delivery. Web 2.0 is part of this problem in generalizing and universalizing the availability and applicability of the online

environment for all social groups. Within this ideology,¹¹ websites no longer hold information but become a platform to connect applications with users. Once more, as occurred when the burst dot.com bubble transformed web designers from the new rock stars into digital street sweepers of cybertumbleweed, Web 2.0 needs “less noise [and] more signal.”¹² As a phrase, it is not only buzzword, but increases the online profile, applications and advantages for those already online, ignoring those still excluded from Web 1.0. Within educational discourses, this initiates a costly confusion of participation with learning and mobility with motivation.

M-learning: from motivation to mobility

In the last ten years theories have seen **e** and **i** added to a range of nouns, rendering them – seemingly immediately – more fashionable, edgy and modern. ‘M’ is becoming a similar bandwagon letter onto which the trendy and aspirational hyphenate the dull, redundant and replaceable. The only distinction in this case is that mobility has been studied in methodical and innovative ways by John Urry¹³ and his research colleagues at CeMoRe, the Centre for Mobility Research at the University of Lancaster. Their paradigmatic investigations have tempered mobile connectivity with mobile failure, and aligned transportation and communication systems with historical rigour. Terrorism has provided a caustic crucible for their work. When placing attention on how people, money and ideas move, mobility becomes a new marker of class and power. Those who hold power have a choice to move. Those who lack power are immobile. Through such a trope, globalization is configured through a distinct interpretative lens, where powerful companies, corporations and individuals are able to move through space and gain profit from exploiting an immobile labour force and then exporting the produced goods around the world.

This confluence between power and mobility is also revealed in transportation networks, where cars are infused with ideologies of individuality, critiquing the collectivity of public transportation. A train imposes a timetable over a person whereas the driver imposes a timetable over the car.¹⁴ ‘Decisions’ about mobility are statements about power but have consequences on the environment. Yet the impact of mobility on and through education is under-researched. Distance education, and the complex media mix

¹¹ Paul Boutin critiqued “Web 2.0,” *Slate*, March 29, 2006, <http://www.slate.com/id/2138951>, when he affirmed “Just call it the Internet. That way, everyone will know what you mean.”

¹² This phrase is part of a critique of Web 2.0 derived from Jeffrey Zeldman, “Web 3.0,” <http://www.alistapart.com/articles/web3point0>, January 16, 2006, accessed on July 3, 2006.

¹³ An example of this research includes John Urry’s “The complexities of the global,” published by the Department of Sociology, Lancaster University, Lancaster UK, <http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/papers/urry-complexities-global.pdf>, July 2, 2004.

¹⁴ M. Featherstone, “Automobilities,” *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 21, No. 4/5, 2004, p. 1-24.

deployed to ensure a connection between learner and learning materials, ‘manages’ the disconnection of the teacher and student, attempting to assist non-standard scholars to create a context for learning. While convergent digitized media can assist such an aim, the mobility of print on paper is often forgotten. A dial up connection will inhibit the type and scale of material accessed online, and where and how it is interpreted and utilized. A difficulty confronting part-time and distance education students is where they can ‘access’ these learning materials that often require broadband. Businesses – even university workplaces – are increasingly blocking the downloading of podcasts or building firewalls to inhibit instant messaging to ensure ‘efficiency’ and ‘concentration.’ The mobility of content has limits.

The mobile media platforms that enfold into popular culture, like motor cars and iPods, are often nodes where humans encounter technology in their daily lives and affirm individuality, particularly the right of the individual to consume without consequences or restrictions. The goal in thinking about web-based education is to ensure that a mechanism for quality-control and evaluation is present, rather than low level celebrations of ‘interactivity.’ Much time and attention is required to evaluate the purpose of education, and how we motivate our students out of their consumer-centric ideology. M-learning must be transformed – from signifying mobility to motivation. Moving ideas between media platforms is not helpful if a student does not have the context, framework or incentive to study.

From: becky¹⁵

Sent: Thursday, 20 April 2006 10:16 PM

To: Tara Brabazon

Subject: Hi Tara

Hi Tara,

Thankyou for trying to help but i am not actually retarded or academically challenged, despite what my essay might suggest, i just gave up on that paper and upon realising that no amount of hours sitting in front of my computer were gonna make it any better, decided to just stop wasting my time and hand it in. And as much as it tears at my very soul to receive the lowest mark possible, i would rather that than cause myself unnecessary hours of stress and anxiety, something to which i have been all too familiar with in the last couple of years.

¹⁵ A borrowed name.

So please don't think that all my assignments are going to be as morbidly degenerate as that one. It was just my first assignment and i had two more which i had also forgotten about which were due the same week. I decided rather than wuss out and ask for an extension i would just accept my responsibilities and get used to it.

By the way sorry for just pinning it on your door, i was in a great hurry to get it in on time and i was still not entirely sure how to hand things in. It will not happen again now that I am clear.

Cheers.

ps. No, this email was not plagiarised.

pps. I'm sorry if this email offends you, I'm sure I'll regret it later. I know you're just trying to help and i do appreciate it alot, but i just didn't want you to expect that i need special treatment. Something else that i am very familiar with. I know it is hard for you to understand my attitude without knowing me at all and I apologise for my forward manner and aggressive defensiveness. I have a lot of trouble accepting help and generally being a nice, decent person. I will try to stop by your office soon though, if you're not totally disgusted at me.

This email is – simply – odd. Becky was unsuited to formal education at this time, finding a small assignment causing ‘unnecessary stress and anxiety’ and ‘wasting’ her time. This message was sent in response to my concern about her first assignment that was ‘submitted’ on my office door without a name, student number or course code, and eight hundred words short of its one thousand word target.

From: "*Tara Brabazon*" <*T.Brabazon@murdoch.edu.au*>

To: Becky

Subject: *Hi Becky*

Date: *Sun, 16 Apr 2006 07:39:53 +0800*

Hi Becky –

I hope you are well. I'm just checking up on you. Your tutor just told me that the paper that was pinned to my office door was yours. No problem, we've got it. But all the other students in the course put it in the assignment box – where all the assignments go. I was so worried, because it wasn't stapled, had no assignment sheet attached to the front, and it could have been stolen while I was at my meeting.

I'm just so happy that we've got it and we've worked out what's going on.

Becky, my suggestion is that I see you weekly until the next assignment is due. Before each lecture and on an overhead, I always put up the hours each week that I can see students, and unfortunately I didn't see you for this assignment. I'm always happy to help in any way.

But can we make sure that I see you to discuss the course once a week, to make sure that all is well? I'm happy to see you at 10:30am every Tuesday through the rest of the semester. I'll make sure that this is your time and no one interrupts our session. Also, your tutor is in the office for her consultancy times straight after the lecture, and has been all semester. And I know she would love to see you.

So please let me know what you would like us to do, to ensure that we can help you get a strong result this semester.

Be well

Tara.

The specific difficulty in the movement from Web 1.0 to 2.0 is that it blurs the relationship between leisure and work. It assumes that learning is convenient and flexible. Students such as Becky confuse discourses, attitudes and institutions, saturating teachers who are trying to assist them with Oprah-fied self absorption. Emails to academics become another place to blog, to reveal half truths, self justifications and displace blame. Such a convergence has consequences for motivation and learning in context.

From: Phil¹⁶

Sent: Friday, 12 May 2006 3:34 AM

To: Tara Brabazon

Subject: MCC106

My name is Phil and I am enrolled in MCC106. You would not know me, as even though I am enrolled I have not been coming to uni at all this semester. I have not submitted any work that has been due as

¹⁶ A borrowed name.

honestly I had lost interest in university after some events that transpired in recent times in my life made it seem irrelevant. However, I now realise this has been a big mistake and I really want to complete this unit and therefore my course at the end of this year. I am very interested in completing this unit even though it is for credit points towards graduation. Is there any way that something can be worked out so I do not fail this unit?

I am eager to come in and see you at any time to discuss this [I am unavailable tomorrow Friday 12th due to work], which I think is the best thing to do. I just hope I have not left it too late. Can you please get back to me and advise me of anything that can be done?

Regards,
Phil

Mobile learning would have assisted Phil. It may have assisted Becky. However the capacity to time-shift their learning was the least of their worries. Motivation was their problem. To address such concerns, teachers need to select delivery platforms that not only align learning goals and outcomes, but develop productive scholarly behaviours, rather than denial, avoidance, displacement or blame.

While the iPod and MP3 players can be used for teaching and learning, a careful translation between discourses is required to avoid a culture of equivalence emerging between listening to a scholarly sonic session and popular music for pleasure. Ensuring a context of teaching and learning is difficult as it must reconfigure the already existing leisure-based compulsions of the platform. Dom Joly outlined the nature of this behaviour.

Every waking moment of my life is now spent in front of my laptop with a huge pile of CDs on my right (not yet in) and an even huger pile on my left (in). Sometimes, on the rare occasions when I leave the house, Stacey cleans up and moves the piles. I come back and start divorce proceedings while wiping away the tears of frustration ... Maybe I could just ignore these and move on quicker. But I can't, everything must be in my laptop, must ... have ... more ... music. I'm up to 10 solid days' worth and I want a month at least.¹⁷

¹⁷ D. Joly, "How iTunes took over my life," *The Independent on Sunday*, December 10, 2006, p. 3.

How curricula materials intervene in this compulsion is an intricate issue for educators to address. Educational podcasts become one more item to import onto the laptop. The context for the content is lost, as easily as the weak album tracks are cut away from a favourite single as it is loaded in the iPod.

An early techno-celebrationist welcomed the Web in education, believing that “we can learn virtually anything from the very source of the information.”¹⁸ Everything can be learnt from the web, except *how* to use it. Digital wallpaper has covered over the cracks of analogue injustice. It is necessary to remove the digital burqa and see those who are working in the adjacent analogue environment. When times are truly bad, we are drawn to the light, the frivolous and the stupid. This phenomenon – which could be called the Paris Hilton Effect – occurs where bored surfers fill their cursors and minds with irrelevancies. We lose the capacity to sift, discard and judge. Information is no longer for social good, but for sale. Democracy, let alone digitization, is not inevitable. Francis Fukuyama, in his movement away from Neo-Conservatism and his earlier arguments in *The End of History*, confirmed that democracy is not an inescapable byproduct of ‘modernization’ or ‘progress.’

This belief in the imminence of democratic change was based on two things. The first had to do with an interpretation of the underlying cross-cultural appeal of democracy and with the contagiousness of the democratic idea at the end of the twentieth century. The second had to do with their belief in the centrality of American power and, in particular, the view that Ronald Reagan’s policies had been critical to the demise of the former Soviet Union ... But a theory of democratic change emerging out of a broad process of modernization like the one laid out in *The End of History* suggests that democratic contagion can take a society only so far; if certain structural conditions are not met, instability and setbacks are in store.¹⁹

There have been many ‘revolutions’ and many information ages.²⁰ The mobility of paper-based print, the speed of the telegraph, the disruptions in the private sphere through the telephone, and the movements of sound and vision through space via the satellite, all transformed identity, community and nation. Yet more than hope and hype is required in aligning digitization with democracy.

Mobile learning in the pod

¹⁸ “Applications of learning,” 2001, <http://connectedteacher.classroom.com/tips/resources/communicating.htm>, accessed on June 16, 2004.

¹⁹ F. Fukuyama, *After the Neocons: America at the Crossroads*, (London: Profile, 2006) p. 57.

²⁰ J. Given, *Turning off the television: broadcasting’s uncertain future*, (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003), p. 65.

Recording lectures onto analogue cassettes was a poor use of sound in education. The Open University promoted other strategies and was successful. They realized that lectures are not only the sound of the lecturer's voice: they include images, music, video, material culture like sporting equipment and fabric swatches, along with the corporeality of gestures and expression. Sound-based learning materials, often downloaded onto a platform used most frequently for leisure-time listening, should deploy the specific advantages of sonic media. For abstract ideas that require reflection, short sonic sessions can be of use and heard on the move.²¹ Yet these must be written, targeted and bespoke for particular courses, approaches and student communities. Not every subject is best learnt through digitized, mobile sound.

Music platforms are central to the public visibility and consumption of particular technological platforms. Music is both part of identity and mobile, bleeding through spaces and creating barriers of sonic difference. The attraction of the iPod and MP3 players are clear: they integrate screen and sound through the potential of digitization. The ease of scrolling through a personal music collection means that hours can be spent satiated in an individual's greatest hits. Yet their use in education is much more arbitrary and ambivalent. The considered integration of sound in curriculum was underplayed in analogue education. The Open University offered best practice for its time. Digitization poses new challenges. Certainly, in the study of music and languages and the development of oral testimony and oral history, the iPod is incredibly useful. Yet there must be care in its use. Education is not a hobby to be slotted into a lifestyle. Without care in the construction of curriculum, the fun and flexibility of sonic mobility will crush the discipline required for motivated learning.

²¹ For a discussion of the development of sonic sessions, please refer to my article, "Socrates in earpods: the ipodification of education," *Fast Capitalism*, http://www.uta.edu/huma/agger/fastcapitalism/2_1/brabazon.htm, Vol. 2, No. 1, July 2006.