
9 October 2014

Dear Friends,

Can new mobile technology address some of the education challenges faced by many African communities? This is an important question that we have been reflecting on at Firelight. We have seen some of our partners send SMS messages weekly to communicate with parents about what they can do to help their children's development and education. We have been discussing mobile data collection on phones to make monitoring and evaluation more effective. We have been thinking about the use of tablets or eReaders in the classroom.

There are many ways to use mobile technology in new and innovative ways to address education issues. However, there are also many constraints in regards to the use of technology in different scenarios.

This Newsflash contains several different viewpoints about the applicability and limitations of using mobile technology for education in Africa. We hope you enjoy it!

Sincerely,

The Firelight Team

(Interview) The insider's guide to mobile learning (m-learning) in Africa: Dr Álvaro Sobrinho, chairman, Planet Earth Institute

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(Interview) The insider's guide to mobile learning (m-learning) in Africa: Dr Álvaro Sobrinho, chairman, Planet Earth Institute

Q1. What is mobile learning (m-learning) – how do you define it?

Put simply, it's learning that is primarily on handheld or portable devices. There's still a bit of confusion about the term, specifically with how it relates to 'e-learning', but essentially the way I view it is learning on a mobile phone or tablet. That makes it different to e-learning and other traditional methods, because it can be far more personal and informal if it's on a device we carry around with us.

Q2. What is the state of m-learning in Africa today?

It's mixed for sure. There is a lot of excitement and an increasing number of big organizations are now running programs, from international groups like USAID and UNESCO to national governments and sponsored initiatives from the telecommunications industry. And you can see why: the mobile phone revolution has been extraordinary in Africa, with the World Bank (2012) reporting that there are over 650 million mobile subscribers on the continent, an increase of over 2,600 percent in the last decade.

However, the PEI's m-learning consultation, conducted last year, discovered a growing frustration that m-learning is still a bit of a gimmick. Many of those consulted from the world of academia, government officials and private sector called for a more integrated approach to m-learning. It shouldn't be seen as a replacement or a silver bullet, but should be part of a wider educational strategy. Scientific and educational development takes more than just new gadgets and devices.

Q3. What needs to change?

I think more collaboration between educators, governments and the private sector (and the media), to try and better integrate m-learning into existing and future strategies. There also needs to be better training available for teachers and those being asked to utilize mobile educational tools. It was very clear from our research that it's no use simply putting textbooks on tablets or giving students new learning apps. M-learning is much more about a change in teaching approach than it is about devices – and here lies the big challenge for m-learning.

Q4. Why do you think mobile is fundamental to bringing change?

There is no doubt about it, mobile has the potential to revolutionize Africa's educational development, reaching more people and making learning more personal, relevant and intuitive. Just look again at the numbers. Increasingly everyday services will be offered on mobiles, as we've already seen with banking (led by Kenya's m-Pesa) health, agriculture and weather updates. M-learning is happening informally whether education ministries like it or not, and the education community needs to seize the opportunities.

Q5. In what ways do you see mobile technology changing learning in Africa?

What came through clearly in our research is a willingness in Africa to integrate informal and formal learning. Rigid educational settings, including classrooms, don't offer the flexibility that many on the continent need. M-learning does, meaning people can learn when it suits them on technology that is increasingly available. While it's not a replacement for formal teaching, the importance of this informal education is enormous and for me, that will be the biggest change. Whether it's a farmer getting weather tips via

SMS or artisanal miners being shown simple health and safety advice on tablets by community leaders in rural societies, it's all education able to benefit Africa's development.

Q6. Do you think that the biggest role for m-learning will be in schools/for people of school age?

I think m-learning in schools will only continue to grow and, over time, I hope they will begin to improve education standards and reach. Projects like Dr Math have already shown value and scale, aiming to reach over a million learners in the next few years, connecting primary school children to professionals to answer simple questions. And similarly, the MoMaths and M4girls initiatives from Nokia are trying to do the same.

But while huge potential is there, there are real dangers and drawbacks about some of these initiatives. As Dr Niall Winters (who joined me at the PEI consultation) points out, m-learning is too often failing teachers at the moment. Currently, too many teachers are left outside the room when these new tools and platforms are developed. If m-learning is really to have a sustained and broad impact in schools, teachers need to be at the heart of it.

Q7. Other than schools, where else do you see m-learning making a major impact? E.g. workplace learning?

One of the most interesting things that came out of our consultation was the issue of mobile workplace learning, and we've since been working with a number of private sector bodies that want to develop new vocational or skills-based courses using tablets. PEI is currently developing schemes related to health and safety and basic management skills for a number of African countries, all delivered on a mobile tablet (stay tuned for announcements over the next few months). In many ways, this type of m-learning has the potential to have a bigger instant impact, because it can help people get jobs and improve their work very quickly, and almost every business on the continent is desperate to close the skills gap.

Q8. What technologies will be involved? Will it be mostly SMS, or will mobile Web also be significant?

Individual delivery choices have to be based on circumstance and project, and I think there will be a mix of SMS, Web-based and preloaded devices for the foreseeable future, until one platform potentially becomes dominant. SMS is a great way to reach rural communities, but increasingly the pilot programs that PEI is working on, for example with Skills@Work, will preload applications onto devices. Preloading apps means they are able to work offline, as well as offering much more advanced and engaging content (including audio and video for example) than you can with traditional SMS.

Q9. What are the drawbacks of m-learning in Africa? What hurdles need to be removed if m-learning is going to go mainstream?

When the PEI consultation asked what was the biggest hurdle to m-learning today, the most common answer was: cost. Not necessarily the cost of the device – mobiles are becoming widely available at ever falling prices – but more the cost of connection.

Ultimately, the costs to get connected are often far too high for the end user.

Content development is an enormous challenge, too, because m-learning does not just mean delivering information to people. Learning isn't just uploading a textbook to an app or mobile device, it's about re-designing and enhancing the way people are taught and the way we learn. And that means training and engagement with everyone involved. To quote Steve Vosloo (UNESCO's former senior project officer for m-learning) who chaired the PEI workshop session at UNESCO: "Education is still highly resistant to change. We need to make the case for m-learning. Because kids have tablets, because it's cool or because it's addictive aren't good enough reasons!"

Aside from these individual hurdles, I would say the biggest drawback for current m-learning programs and discussions in Africa is unfortunately the distortion that the hype and excitement brings to broader educational policies. Because it makes a nice headline, m-learning is skewing much of the debate on science, education and technology in Africa. While we welcome increased investment in m-learning, I'm increasingly worried by seeing budgets of Ministries of Education of Science and programs of international organizations being totally and blindly devoted to m-learning. M-learning is not the answer to everything and isn't a magic solution. One of the reasons the One laptop per child program was deemed a failure was because of a lack of collaboration between educational ministries and institutions, and m-learning advocates should learn from that.

Q10. What have been the recent landmarks in m-learning Africa?

African Governments are increasingly involving m-learning and ICT in their education policies. In fact, the World Bank found that by 2007-2008 48 out of 53 African countries had ICT education involved in their policies. To name a few specifically, Mozambique's Ministry of Education now has the Technology Plan for Education, which includes a large proportion of m-learning; while the Ugandan Education Ministry has introduced SMS service for examination registration and results information.

As well as the examples I pointed to earlier in South Africa (Dr Math, MoMaths and M4girls), the SMS Education Management Application (SEMA) in Kenya was largely considered a successful project. The interesting thing about SEMA was that it focused on supporting teachers, rather than students, helping around 200,000 primary school teachers with logistical information, tips and advice.

In general, I think there is an important piece of work to be done around best practice and a library of case studies for m-learning, and I'm delighted it's something UNESCO is currently trying to do, as recommended by the UNESCO Mobile Learning Week Report, back in 2011 (see page 13).

Q11. What for you have been the most inspirational stories in m-learning?

I think the way mobile has developed in Africa has largely been in response to immediate need. And for me, some of the most inspirational examples don't yet come from m-learning as such, but in how mobiles have fast become crucial to people's lives. That includes everyday services such as the m-banking revolution led by M-PESA, but also more socially focused initiatives, like the Ushahidi platform, a free tool to share geo-tagged eyewitness reports by email or text, which has transformed the way people received information about elections, for example.

I think the m-learning community need to draw on how these inspiring examples connected with people and helped them achieve what they wanted to on a mass scale.

Q14. What are your top 5 tips for best practice in m-learning?

1. Get everyone involved from the start – while projects can be initiated top down, they have to have buy in from all involved and users need to have a say in how they are developed.
2. Don't be drawn in by the gadget – remember it's just a platform. As someone in our consultation said, 'Sometimes the best m-learning tool is the pencil!'
3. Look again at content – don't just put textbooks on tablets. Re-design the approach and think about how mobile can enhance learning.
4. Keep a good record of your project and be prepared to share the knowledge – the m-learning community is still new and needs to learn from each others experiences.
5. Long-term thinking – sometimes projects have stopped after a relatively short amount of time, largely due to a lack of funding, so it's important to have long-term sustainability plans and work with local partners.

For the full interview visit: <http://bit.ly/YUX9LT>

(Opinion Article) How teachers in Africa are failed by mobile learning

By Niall Winters

Excerpts:

Excluding teachers-

Let's begin with a simple question: when was the last time you heard the voice of teachers from Sub-Saharan Africa extolling the virtues of mobile phones in education? I'm not talking about nicely staged interviews — I mean really telling us how their teaching was fundamentally improved.

Now, a second question: when was the last time you heard that teachers in Africa are not trained properly, are demotivated and that the formal education systems in which they

work are weak? My hunch is that you've heard much more about this than you've heard teachers praising mobile technology.

My concern is that some people use the problems with education systems to justify excluding teachers from the design and development of mobile learning interventions. Teachers' voices are marginalised. And mobile operators association GSMA (to take just one example) characterises the teaching profession in a way that divorces it from progress and innovation.

The difficulties teachers face are used as a starting point for criticism, rather than as a motivation to address systemic issues. A good example of this is how the technology community has openly welcomed 2013 TED Prize winner Sugata Mitra's work on learning through self-instruction and peer-shared knowledge, even though his approach to achieving this is highly contested among educational researchers and practitioners. [3]

It is a mistake to run down teachers' professionalism to justify technology use in education.

Creating an alternative vision

Instead, we need to create an alternative vision that values and prioritises teacher involvement in mobile learning.

First, begin by acknowledging that supporting teacher involvement is a messy, time-consuming and resource-intensive process. And commit to it — there is no magic technology bullet.

Second, understand that many teachers in Sub-Saharan Africa work under tough conditions; and build on research that analyses how these affect their teaching. An in-depth 2012 study in Tanzania, for example, found that teachers wanted to improve their qualifications and be respected but were constrained by resource limitations and the demands of daily life, which UNESCO (the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) clearly recognises: overcrowded classrooms, malnourished students, low pay and a high-pressure workload. [4]

Third, learn from the One Laptop per Child programme. Its uptake in Sub-Saharan Africa was generally judged to have failed because of a lack of integration with education ministries.

It is teachers who will support students with mobile learning interventions and help safeguard success. They need a central role in truly multi-stakeholder partnerships.

Build local capacity

Clearly, more investment in teacher training is needed within — and beyond — mobile learning programmes. Research has shown the crucial role teachers play in designing, developing and implementing education technologies.

Three things need to happen to support a more central role for teachers: reconfiguration of mobile learning projects, an increased use of participatory methodologies and less techno-centrism.

To view the full article visit: <http://bit.ly/1vfjrcr>

(Press Release) Virtual School Puts the Power of Basic Education Back into the Hands of Every Learner, Teacher and Parent in South Africa

Business Wire, September 12, 2014

In partnership with Mxit Reach and UNICEF, the South African Education Ministry today proudly launched the Ukufunda Virtual School, a program utilizing both smartphones and feature phones to deliver high-quality education to the underserved, rural corners of South Africa.

Ukufunda, which means “learn to grow and grow to learn” in Zulu, will promote equitable access to quality learning and teaching, enable professional development of teachers, and support curriculum delivery – all through the revolutionary use of mobile phones.

With the support of Mxit, the South African-born mobile social networking platform, Ukufunda seeks to address a problem inherent in many other virtual schools today: namely that most mobile-enabled educational technology requires access to the web or smart devices. In South Africa, as in many parts of the world, access to the web and ownership of a smart device is beyond the reach of those who need education the most. Because Mxit can function in areas where only 2G connectivity is available and on over 8,000 devices – on everything from feature phones to smartphones and tablets – the benefits of the virtual school are no longer restricted to smartphone users.

“The Ukufunda Virtual School will directly address inequalities in the school system, raise education standards and put the power of basic education back into the hands of every learner, teacher and parent,” says Mr. Enver Surty, Deputy Minister of Basic Education in South Africa.

Founded in 2005, Mxit is a South African mobile social network with millions of active users monthly. Because Mxit is incredibly data-light – thanks to a unique compression algorithm to control data consumption and lower costs – users are able to spend more time chatting, learning, or just socializing in as many as 22 different languages.

“We believe that one of our most important roles is to act as a technology conduit, linking experts such as the Department of Basic Education and UNICEF and their content and services with the people who need it most,” says Andrew Rudge, CEO of Mxit Reach.

“We are excited to be part of such a meaningful project. Ukufunda doesn’t only provide free access to great educational content, but is rather a holistic approach to learner and teacher wellbeing, focusing on psychosocial support, safety and wellness. It’s a giant leap forward in improving lines of communication and linking all stakeholders,” comments Ms. Nadi Albino, Chief of Education, UNICEF South Africa.

“A good school doesn’t just have excellent teachers, it also has a great supportive environment – there are counsellors to deal with psychosocial issues, experts to guide career choices, and leadership courses to develop well-rounded individuals. Ukufunda provides all of these and more,” concludes Mr. Enver Surty, Deputy Minister of Basic Education.

To view the full article visit: <http://bit.ly/1vyl25V>

(Accepting Applications) The Global Innovation Fund – £30,000 to £10 million Project Grants to invest in Developing Countries

Deadline: Ongoing

Funders around the world are worried about the humanitarian problems in developing countries. Non-profit organizations, social enterprises, for-profit firms, researchers and government agencies around the world who have best approaches to solve any major development problem in low-or middle-income countries are invited to apply for the Global Innovation Fund.

The Global Innovation Fund invests in social innovations that aim to improve the lives and opportunities of millions of people in the developing world. The Fund encourages Solutions that can scale up commercially, through the public/philanthropic sector, or through a combination of both in order to achieve widespread adoption.

The Global Innovation Fund offers financing from £30,000 to £10 million, with the largest funding amounts reserved for innovations that can demonstrate evidence of success and that have potential to spread across multiple developing countries.

Application Process

- Initial Application – Send a summary business plan or project proposal, coupled with an explanation of how the innovation creates social impact. Include – organization’s mission, team, problem being addressed, solution, funding/business model, growth strategy, key risks and the planned uses of the funding requested along with an approach for tracking results and social impact.
- Notification of Selection – Promising applicants will be invited to submit full application.

- Full Application – This application requires a more detailed description of the applicant’s innovation and plan, team composition, and supporting research/evidence with quantitative estimates along with detailed budgetary projections and financial plans.
- Grant Agreement – Once an application has been conditionally approved through GIF’s review process, GIF will negotiate a funding agreement with the applicant.

Following are the points initial application should answer

- What is the problem or global development challenge the innovation addresses.
- How the innovation will address the problem.
- How the approach is better than current ways of solving the problem.
- If applicable, describe the business model that will be used to commercialize the innovation.
- How the fund provided by GIF will be used.
- What the key risks to the success of proposed innovation are and how the applicant will try to address these risks.

The Global Innovation Fund has three stages of Financing – Pilot, Test & Transition and Scaling Up.

For complete details, please visit: <http://bit.ly/1rQLyJJ>

As part of the Firelight Foundation's Capacity Building Program, Firelight provides "Newsflashes" to share relevant resources and information with our active grantee-partners via weekly emails and via post on a monthly basis. We hope that by facilitating access to information for grassroots, community-focused organizations, programming for children and families, as well as organizational development, is enhanced. Past editions of the Firelight Newsflash can be found on our website:

<http://www.firelightfoundation.org/resources/newsflash>

We welcome your comments, feedback and ideas for upcoming Newsflashes at newsletter@firelightfoundation.org

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