Complexity, Communication, and Control: Perspectives on Mobile

According to the 2011 edition of *The Horizon Report*, the mobile manufacturer Ericsson estimates that by 2015, 80 percent of people will access the Internet from a mobile device. In Japan, more than 75 percent of Internet users already do. For educators, Internet-capable mobile devices may soon outnumber computers. In addition to the many people who use mobiles as their first choice for accessing web resources, new devices such as the iPad “are expanding our notions of portability” (http://net.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/HR2011.pdf).

This issue of *EDUCAUSE Review* offers several perspectives on mobile technology—thoughts on how our expanding notions of portability are intersecting with, influencing, and advancing many of our current ideas on teaching, on e-books, on iPads, on websites, on mobile devices, and even on change itself. These perspectives highlight three dominant and interwoven aspects of mobility that our institutions need to consider: complexity, communication, and control.

The *complexity* of mobile technologies ranges from the technical (e.g., different devices and interfaces) to the social (e.g., faculty-student interaction). Mary Ann Gawelek, Mary Spataro, and Phil Komarny describe Seton Hill University’s experiment of providing all full-time students and faculty (and many staff) with iPads and discuss the complexity involved in coordinating infrastructure, support, and faculty development. Of course, people and their habits introduce additional complexity, as David McCarthy illustrates. He explains how digital books, or e-books, “require that readers fundamentally change the way they interact with a book’s content.” The multiple layers of the reading hardware, the reading software and ecosystem, and the content must be tailored to the needs of the user. And those needs vary considerably, from reading casually to studying a text.

Mobile technology offers an array of content-delivery opportunities, enabling *communication* that was previously awkward or impossible. Susan T. Evans notes: “With mobile delivery, a college or university literally meets the audiences where they are.” She reminds those institutions that are planning mobile websites: “The decisions to be made are less about technology and more about communication.” Both content and users matter. Yet mobile raises interesting communication challenges and questions as well, especially in the area of teaching. Should students be allowed to use mobile devices in class? Can the use of these devices improve students’ learning experiences? As David Parry points out, the mobile web and social media such as Twitter suggest the emergence of a new form of literacy. Parry advises us to think about “the skills needed to navigate and take ownership of these spaces,” while he cautions that these skills “far exceed the comparatively simple skill of comprehending written text.”

Beyond complexity and communication, *control* emerges as a key issue intertwined in the use of mobile technologies. For example, in explaining the UCLA “service layering” and Mobile Web Framework, Jim Davis and Rosemary A. Rocchio discuss the institutional decision to “let go of local control” of the mobile device, in order to accommodate an ever-changing array of devices. Likewise, Tracy Futhey emphasizes that the mobility revolution represents “a fundamental shift in the way people are consuming information and the role they are taking in producing information. We can no more hold off that tidal wave of change than we could stop our students from using Facebook five years ago.” Students and faculty choose their mobile devices; they select (or create) their own applications; and
they sign up for whichever mobile services they want. Futhey adds: “We’ll need to embrace some of the commodity data and voice services, but at the same time, we need to try to get ahead of them and help to direct where they’re going.”

Taken together, these three issues of complexity, communication, and control may signify a deeper change being introduced by mobile. In March 2011, Oliver Burkeman wrote in The Guardian: “The internet is over.” That is, the days of the Internet “as an identifiably separate thing” may be gone. He noted that the “ubiquitous computing” first noted in 1988 has given way, with mobile technologies, to “the arrival of the truly ubiquitous internet.” The boundary between online life and real life has disappeared (http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2011/mar/15/sxsw-2011-internet-online).

If Burkeman is right, what does the disappearance of this boundary line mean for colleges and universities? Welcome to the mobile world.

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