WHAT MOBILE LEARNING AND WORKING REMOTELY CAN LEARN FROM EACH OTHER

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ABSTRACT

To a large extent, developments in the workplace and in (especially formal) education still take place independently from each other, regardless of a strong (market driven) demand to bring both closer to each other. The divide is especially visible when looking at developments towards e-working (telecommuting, …) on the one hand and developments towards and in e-learning (online learning, mobile learning, …) on the other. Nevertheless, mobile learning and working remotely (telecommuting) share a number of concerns as well as a potential for a paradigmatic shift in what we expect as their output. In this reflection paper we explore how experiences and good practices from both domains can be put to work in an overall move towards a more innovative society. The key, it turns out, is not an either/or but a flexible organization in which a blend of face-to-face and distance interact in a truly mobile context in which learning environments are designed as knowledge workplaces and workplaces as learning environments.

KEYWORDS

Mobile learning, working remotely, telecommuting, innovation

1. INTRODUCTION

February 2013. Yahoo! announces that it will shut down its remote-work program. While it would be all too easy to dismiss this as 'back to old style' (reportedly, Yahoo!'s offices increasingly look like those of young tech startups) the move is not without significance and importance. Marissa Mayer, Yahoo's CEO, defended the decision claiming that "people are more productive when they're alone," but "more collaborative and innovative when they're together." Regardless of her (disputable) premise –new technologies give a radically different meaning to 'together'-- it is important to understand that the aim of the decision is really innovation.

In education as well we notice trends towards innovative thinking, away from an emphasis on the sheer bulk of readily available information/knowledge. Ubiquitous internet access is increasingly taking care of that aspect of our cognition. Not only does the internet make this possible, it also does this at a time when the exponential explosion of available (scientific) knowledge pushes most learners to the limit (or even beyond) of the capacity of their memory. The shift is towards more encompassing competences, still including knowledge but stressing the importance of skills and attitudes. In education as well, innovative thinking is increasingly seen as a major value across different domains and levels.

Laura Vanderkam's reflection on Yahoo's decision, "Home vs. Office: Where should you work?" (Vanderkam 2013) could therefore easily be paraphrased as "Home vs. School: Where should you learn?" In both cases the question remains whether 'versus' should be taken to mean 'either/or'. We contend it shouldn't.

2. WHENEVER YOU WANT, WHEREVER YOU WANT?

In mobile learning, "whenever you want, wherever you want" is a leading theme, crystalized in concepts such as just-in-time learning – delivering training (also or especially to workers) when and where it is needed. This should not be mistaken to imply that the role of technology in delivering information where and when it is needed will turn learners into autonomous participants in lifelong, learner driven, project based learners. As Margeret Riel rightly points out "Education implies a plan that integrates learning into larger

intellectual frameworks that will serve the learner in immediate and generative contexts. This requires dynamic teacher-student interactions around an integrated course of knowledge and skills, with the structure influenced by forces in the economy, academy and community." Classrooms are being transformed into learning communities which can be local as well as geographically dispersed. (Riel 1998)

It is obvious that such paradigmatic shifts in the design of courses and programs will have an effect on the design of learning environments, both physical and virtual. That effect has not yet fully materialized –many (if not most) virtual learning environments still mimic the structure and elements of traditional face-to-face teaching—but interesting projects are being launched. In 2012, Paul Kim, Chief Technology Officer and Assistant Dean of Stanford University's School of Education offered an online course on designing a new learning environment based on the observation that "we construct, access, visualize, and share information in very different ways than we did decades ago" In this course (as in other online courses), students work together in teams with people around the world. The aim is "to design and develop an application or system that combines team interaction activities and learning support features in ways that are effective and appropriate for today's computing and communication devices." (Kim 2012)

Learning environments change, but so does the workplace. 'Workplace," of course, does not just refer to offices, but let us focus on those even though warehouses, workshops and studios offer extremely interesting environments to explore mobile, just-in-time and situated learning. In line with Taylorism, the late 19th century brought corporate board rooms, offices for managers and an open factory-like floor for common workers, reflecting a breakdown of work in increasingly more specific and repetitive tasks. While cubicles, first introduced for the growing group of middle managers in the 1980s (and later generalized for most office workers), offered more privacy, they also discouraged social interaction. As communication became more central in the operational models of organizations, designers started to focus on office ecologies offering a variety of spaces shared by all – ideally including shared desks, cubicles, silent areas, cafeterias, meeting rooms, … (not unlike some aspects of the physical and virtual learning environments explored in education).

However fascinating, for lack of proper design, space, budget … such offices are in practice often far from ideal for a number of reasons including any number of the following:

1. Noise (and headsets to shut it out)
2. Constant Interruptions
3. Lack of privacy (listening in on telephone conversations, computer screen, …)
4. Forced social interaction (unless you accept to be the odd one out)
5. Odors (perfumes, deodorants, food, …)
6. Lack of 'personalized' space (pictures, flowers, …)
7. Avoidance behavior (coming in early, staying late, sneaking in over the weekend, …)

Gensler, Art and Drue Gensler's architecture and design firm (operating offices in 43 cities in 14 countries and who's realizations include the Shanghai Tower), was looking for research to support their design decisions (in that respect reconnecting with Taylor) and initiated surveys in the US and the UK, hoping for insights in the nature of work in an era in which the "knowledge economy is powered by individuals and teams creating organizational value and driving business performance" with "ideas, information and expertise" as "the new currency of business success." (Pogue 2009) The Gensler 2008 Workplace Survey clearly indicates that an environment supporting the four work modes of the knowledge workplace—focus, collaboration, learning, and socializing—offers a definite competitive advantage and a measurable ROI.

As even Marissa Mayer, Yahoo's CEO, concedes: people are more productive when they are alone. This is a recognition of the importance of the 'focus' aspect of the knowledge workplace. Working from home is an important tool to accomplish this. Jason Fried and David Hansson, in Remote –their experience with and perspective on the advantages of working remotely – point out that few people refer to "at the office, in the afternoon" as the place and time where and when they can really get work done – hence coming in early, staying late and sneaking in over the weekend. But they acknowledge that 'home' as an alternative may not be literally 'at home' where television, children, chores, and errands may be as interruptive and intrusive and interruptive as co-workers in the physical office. Home may be home, or a café, or a park. (Fried and Hanson 2013)

Increasingly, the question is not just about the false dichotomy 'office' or 'home' but about finding the right mix of physical and/or virtual environments and about using the right (virtual) tools and about using them right. Using them right may mean not reading emails for a few hours or setting up your phone to ring anyway when a specific someone calls you even though you turned it to silent in order to focus on a difficult task. It also might mean not to hesitate to go meet people face-to-face when you think the blink of an eye or a slight hesitation in an answer might be significant and important. That flexibility too is mobility.

3. VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS AS REMOTE KNOWLEDGE WORKPLACES

How, if at all, is a learning environment different from a knowledge workplace? Traditional classrooms are, in a sense, often not very different from shared workspaces: filled with noise (there is almost always someone talking, often a teacher), with constant interruptions (calls to attentions, instructions), no privacy, forced social interaction, odors, no room for individualized space, together resulting in avoiding behavior (from showing up late to skipping class altogether).

Bakker and Akkerman point at 4 aspects of boundary crossing between (a traditional) school and the (traditional) workplace: identification, coordination, reflection and transformation all of which they qualify as learning processes. Identity involves conceptual issues such as defining one's professional field, one's role within that field, or even symbols related to those. Identity may also be physically defined by walls. In the workplace, other attitudes are expected. Coordination involves competency profiles, portfolios and assessments which bridge work and schooling. Interestingly, they point at the use of mobile devices as physical tools which are used cross the school/work boundary. Complex reflexive processes lead to perspective making and perspective taking. Here as well, Bakker and Akkerman point at mobile technology such as smartphones to facilitate that process. Transformation is the process in which boundary crossing has an (innovative) effect on both school and workplace. (Baker and Akkerman 2014)

In the context of this paper, we specify 'school' as 'mobile learning' and 'workplace' as 'working remotely'. What we are looking for is how identification, coordination, and reflection can transform mobile learning and working remotely through a process of boundary crossing. Mobile learning, from this perspective, is not just about "whenever you want, wherever you want" but about the opportunity to move around to find (as in the case of the knowledge workplace) the right physical and/or virtual environment. Mobile learning is also about using the right (virtual) tools and about using them right. This may include some (admittedly difficult to accomplish!) autonomous participation in lifelong, learner driven, project based learning but may also mean taking learning to the (on site or remote) workplace or to watching –undisturbed- -a videotaped or streamed class rather than attending it physically. Mobile learning may also refer to virtually sharing an annotated document with colleagues, to creating your own learning objects (and sharing them), to setting up a video call with an expert on another continent in another time zone, to stripping a car in your backyard while using a tablet to look up on the internet whatever there is to see or to know and to mapping the pictures in your online driver's license course to a dozen cars and traffic situations.

In the mobile learning environment, just as in the knowledge workplace, the right mix of focus, collaboration, learning (as in memorizing and other cognitive and metacognitive operations that support understanding and comprehension, memorization, retention and recall), and socializing is essential. An interesting observation: we noticed that geographically close adult learners, participating in an eLearning program, started to organize themselves physically as a group, meeting for example in the cafeteria of the school, each working at their own pace, but interacting in very different ways than would or even could ever be the case in a classroom. That too is mobility.

4. CONCLUSION & AFTERTHOUGHT

'Office & school' vs. 'home' is a false dichotomy, masking the need for dynamic and rich environments (whether a 'learning environment' or a 'workplace' – that too is a false dichotomy) in which focus, collaboration, learning, and socializing all have their proper place, taking into account strategic and operational personal and organizational goals, individual characteristics of people, and the lever of the spur

of the moment. Mobility is an important tool to accomplish that dynamic equilibrium, made possible and supported by technology. Mobility makes us flexible and flexibility is what we need in the complex and dynamic environment which is ours.

An afterthought. Commonly voiced concerns about mobile learning (as an extreme case of eLearning) and remote working include issues related to authenticity, especially in certifying courses and programs, and even more so when certification has a civil effect such as access to a profession or career advancement. Other concerns relate to value. Employers are concerned they will not receive value for their money and students worry about getting value for the money they paid, perhaps implicitly or explicitly assuming that what tuition is paying for is really teacher time in front of a classroom (what else could it be for: so much online information is for free!). There are more. But a common theme, it appears to me, is trust. Trust that workers/learners like to work/learn, like to be proud of what they accomplished, and like to contribute to reaching goals. Trust is an essential element in a human society and the fact that we can trust and distrust is in itself an evolutionary indication that trust should not be unconditional. In the absence of trust we have to face our fears. Often fear is related to what is new and unknown. Much of our concerns about mobility – mobile learning as well as remote working—find their origin is what we most of us are used to: a 9 to 5 job/education in a familiar environment. Leaving that trusted environment, literally, may not be easy. Look at it this way: you never get far by staying where you are.

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