

In truth, I don't know whether a BlackBerry is a curse or not but, if it's a blessing, it's wearing a wig and a false beard. Like many educators, I've watched heavy-hearted as would-be learners enter my sessions peering into PDAs, fingers flying across keypads after a break spent not in mature reflection but in fire-fighting.

I know it will take me at least 20 minutes to drag them back from that distant land – *if* they have stuck to the deal we initially struck: “Turn your mobiles off during sessions and you'll have frequent breaks so you can keep the wheels of commerce turning.” Yet ringtones still erupt from pockets and silent phones pirouette across tables.

The problem lies not in mobile technology itself – it has brought huge benefits and enriched lives – but how we use it. (Politely) ignoring the implied criticism of my skills, my concern is that – since its introduction – I've noticed that executives whose organisations pay them to think and lead can easily spend more time doing less of either.

Mobile technology makes so much – including valuable learning resources and opportunities – accessible to us, but also makes *us* inescapably accessible. Its instant nature can also give a powerful impression of urgency, even where it's undeserved: without discipline, executives' energies can be expended on inappropriate agendas.

This discipline won't be easy. Network providers give away free mobile phones because they recognise us as ‘Man, The Compulsive Communicator’. Even Pavlov might consider his canine experiments inconclusive compared with the ‘conditioning’ observable in the mobile's siren song.

More insidiously, it can be comforting for executives to be ‘spared’ the need to do stuff that might make a difference if their days are full of highly efficient but essentially low-value activity. I know a PDA can be a very useful tool – the ability to gain remote access to ‘just-in-time’ learning resources in

order to address pressing issues is a real gain – but, equally, I think it makes a really bad boss.

A few years ago, I had the pleasure of meeting Professor Richard E Clark of the Rossier School of Education, University of Southern California, a leader in the field of Cognitive Task Analysis applied to multimedia instruction. He understands the virtues of concentration: he has identified that the practice of enriching e-learning solutions with sound and moving images – made possible by the processing power now available in mobile devices – can create a condition of overload in which the learner cannot cope with the level of sensory stimulation and ‘zones out’.

In this condition, cognition ceases and learners seek relief through displacement activity – preferably one that appears productive – to avoid the guilt attached to its most traditional variety: daydreaming.

What Professor Clark and the telcos understand is that, confronted by difficult work like the need to acquire a new skill, we will – if our concentration is broken or we are ‘overloaded’ – seek refuge in activity that requires little effort but provides the outward appearance of ‘work’. The way forward lies in focusing not merely on what is *possible* – densely rich learning environments and the ability to respond to every communication – but what is *desirable*: just enough technology to deliver learning, and enough attention to focus on it when it is our most pressing priority.

Mobile technology is a powerful force.

If we put in the effort to harness its virtues rather than surrendering to its power to distract, it really can be a blessing in disguise. ■



TRANSFER AND APPLICATION

In a new series looking at the issues surrounding the transfer and application of learning, **Robert Terry** asks whether mobile technology is a curse or a blessing

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