Mobile devices include smart-phones, games consoles, digital cameras, media players, netbooks and handheld computers. Almost everyone owns one and uses one, often more than one. Not only do they own them and use them but they also invest considerable time, effort and resource choosing them, buying them, customising them and exploiting them. These devices express part or much of their owners’ values, affiliations, identity and individuality through their choice and their use. They are both pervasive and ubiquitous, both conspicuous and unobtrusive, both noteworthy and taken-for-granted in the lives of most – but not all – of the people of Europe and the rest of the world.

This is new and is completely different from older, static and less personal information technologies such as desktop computers and TVs. It is a quantitatively different phenomenon and the statistics are commonplace: mp3 downloads outnumber CD sales, camera-phones outnumber cameras, smart-phones outnumber laptops, mobile phone ownership is passing saturation and the British, for example, send over a billion texts a week. Mobile devices are however also a qualitatively different phenomenon. People no longer need to engage with information and discussion at the expense of real life but can do so as part of real life as they move about the world, using their own devices to connect them to the people and ideas of their own choosing, perhaps using their own devices to generate and produce content and conversation as well as store and consume them. This is changing how people relate to technology. It is also changing how they relate to each other, to the content and conversation facilitated by the technology and consequently to learning and education.

This chapter outlines the notion of mobility and the role of mobile devices, technologies and systems in changes in aspects of our societies, and looks at the impact and the implications of these changes for education and those that learn and teach, asking whether the education system, especially the institutions of formal learning, the schools, colleges and universities, need to make tactical, technical changes and reforms, asking whether ‘business-as-usual’ still possible? Or whether these changes suggest that the education system is somehow broken and no longer fit-for-purpose? Or whether there is some more complex and fragmented answer between these two extremes? The formal education system is
not however monolithic and coherent; different stakeholders will see its role and purpose differently and its relations to society differently too, different parts of it will be informed by different politics and educational theories and philosophies. The changes being described are not monolithic and will wash over different parts of the system in different ways and at different speeds. Consequently this account is only a starting point.

The Educational Implications of the Economic Aspects of Mobiles

The economic aspects of these trends are twofold. Firstly, the shifts in the nature of economic activity, that is in the jobs people do, the products and services they supply, the assets and resources they invest and the businesses they work for, as mobile systems become more and more central to economies across the world. Mobile phone networks and hardware manufacturers are major multinational organisations, investing in research and development, developing products, supplying services and employing many thousands of people, at the expense of more traditional parts of the economy. Media distributors and banking operations amongst others, have adapted to the new mobile economy and trade ring-tones, downloads, airtime and credits.

Secondly, the changes in the nature of work itself, in the times and places of work and the relationships within work are changing. The improved connectivity between a mobile workforce and its headquarters means greater efficiency since workers can be deployed and supported at a distance. It also means greater supervision and increased deskilling. Furthermore since mobile technologies operate on the move as well as at a distance, we see increasing workloads as people stay connected on holidays and weekends, and we see the day-extender syndrome, weakening home/work boundaries, as people work whilst they travel or relax. One early study inferred that, with mobile phones,

“people more often use mixed-use settings to make communications that were previously associated with strong social settings.....because mixed use settings do not have clear, legible cues, more work communications will take place during “social” time or with family and friends in these settings, and personal communications will take place even during work time or with co-workers in these settings” (Gant & Kiesler 2002; p. 130).

Another aspect of the change observed was work activities that had become mobile