A Mobile Direction For Learning
Interview with Michael Greer
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KENNEALLY: A smartphone screen is usually quite small, leading many of us, especially authors and publishers, to think that screen reading is somehow a diminished experience. But what if we shift our thinking and view mobile media as a new pathway for reading and learning?

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. In the college classroom today, smartphones and tablets are ubiquitous. Instructors may harbor lingering doubts about the shift away from print, but most students have no such qualms. For a visually impaired student, screen reading software means a fair chance at an education. For a student who holds down a full-time job, mobile means access to assignments and class discussions on the go.

Educator, editor, and author Michael Greer is an online instructor at the University of Arkansas-Little Rock and author of the latest editions of *The Little, Brown Handbook* and *The Little, Brown Compact Handbook*. He urges textbook authors and college instructors alike to recognize that mobile has surpassed desktop as the preferred point of access for most online readers, and he urges them to seize the opportunity this presents for a new direction in learning. He joins me now in Santa Fe, New Mexico, where we are both attending the annual conference of the Text & Academic Authors Association. Michael Greer, welcome back to Beyond the Book.

GREER: Thanks. Glad to be here. Good to see you again, Chris. And I'm glad to be recording another episode of Beyond the Book.

KENNEALLY: Indeed, and so am I, because we've been having an ongoing conversation for a number of years about the way that technology has been changing the way we learn, the way we consume our learning, and the way, in fact, we help to teach others. This is your interest right now, and you've shared your ideas about this medium of mobile and the potential it has for a great long time. For authors and instructors, Michael, let's start by asking what we can do to assure that texts are useful and usable for these new readers, these new mobile readers.

GREER: Yeah, that's a good and important question. The first thing that I want to suggest – I've been an evangelist for mobile for some time, and I want to reassure people that we're not necessarily talking about replacing print. We're talking about supplementing print. I've found that if we think about mobile as one part of a learning ecosystem that includes print and web-based platforms, that's a nice way to think of it, and it helps to kind of connect with the themes that you were suggesting in your introduction about a new pathway or a new opening up. People tend to think of the small screen, and they think of it as a diminished experience of a printed book. Let's stop comparing it to a print book and think about what can mobile do as mobile?

To that end, I think one of the most important things for authors and for instructors to do is to practice reading on your own mobile phone. Just learn what that experience is like. Learn what that medium can do. Because it can do a lot of things that a print book can't do. So I encourage people to view their own course websites on a mobile phone and see how that works, go to their university website and see how that works, pull up their book if they're a textbook author, see what that looks like, and just begin to see and experience that from the student's point of view. I think a lot of the pressure and resistance to this is simply based out of fear or maybe lack of experience. So one way to build the comfort level is become a mobile reader and kind of experience the world through your students' eyes.

KENNEALLY: And when you're doing that, you're not looking at a book any longer. You're looking at the format that the student is receiving all the material on. What do you see when you do that, Michael? Counter the charge that this is a diminished experience. I think you would probably argue that it is, frankly, a potentially amplified experience.

GREER: I think it is a potentially amplifying experience. For one thing, you can do a lot of things on a mobile phone that you can't do in a printed book. You can include audio. You can include video. You can link to other things. So the phone becomes essentially the gateway or the portal to a whole bunch of information that can be on a course website or another publisher's website. It becomes a point of entry.

And what I find is that students report that they use mobile about 50% of the time to access their course materials and read their course texts. The other times, they may be sitting there with a mobile phone in one hand and the print book in another. So it's a kind of multidimensional experience that they're having – a multimedia

experience, if you will – where they are simultaneously operating on two or three different media. Again, it's a supplement to print, not necessarily a replacement to print.

KENNEALLY: So where we can take that, then, is to begin to give the students the kinds of choices, the kinds of options that they're actually looking for.

GREER: Yes, and that's very important, because I do think one of the big shifts that happens when you move from print to a mobile interface is the reader has more control over her pathway through the information. It's distinctively nonlinear. So we need to be careful to design content that can be read in multiple pathways. Somebody might come in at Chapter 1 and read 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6, or they might come in at Chapter 5 and bounce around and then go back to Chapter 1.

We need to support and encourage that kind of nonlinear, choose your own adventure sort of pathway through the material, because we find that different students learn in different ways, so having choice and having the ability to map their own journey through the content is very important. That's something that a mobile interface can definitely support, because you're tapping and swiping with your finger. It's a very tangible, very intimate kind of medium. So is a book. You're holding a book in your hands and you're flipping through the pages. But mobile allows you to sort of move laterally through the content in a way that I think is a little bit hard to do in a print book.

KENNEALLY: We have talked in the past about the way that this – it pushes authors to be less authorial, to recognize that they've got partners in all of this. If they have a partner in a classroom, that would be the student. And the students then really become kind of co-authors. Perhaps that's exaggerating slightly, but I think that's the point. They are co-creators of the learning experience.

GREER: They are, and that's true in many ways. First of all, because they are writing – I mean, I teach writing classes, so I'm actually asking students to write. They're contributing their own voices to the conversation. They're contributing to the discussion boards. And in my class, I actually had them do case studies which were then published in the mobile app. So they in fact did become literally co-authors of the printed – or of the course text on the mobile app, and they got to experience what it was like to try to create for that medium.

We sort of closed the loop, where originally they were consuming content that I had written. By the end, they were writing content that I was consuming. So they

got to experience a kind of 360-degree view of what it's like to read in this medium, what it's like to write and compose and design in this medium and actually get their fingers into the technology and see – what does it mean for literacy? What does it mean for writing? What does it mean for a narrative when you're writing for this new, very experimental kind of a medium?

KENNEALLY: Were there surprises, and did the students wind up trying things out that you hadn't even anticipated?

GREER: They did. They went a lot further than I expected. They were linking to all kinds of stuff. So they ended up producing these case studies. One of them wrote about the designer and typographer Ellen Lupton and found a bunch of her stuff on the Rhode Island School of Design and basically produced a mini-course unto itself on the work of Ellen Lupton and her typographic design. So they really took it and ran with it.

Some of the students were more comfortable working in a sort of Microsoft Word, print-based medium. I wouldn't say that everybody loved it equally. But I wanted them to kind of reflect on that experience even if they didn't love it and to reflect on why and to think about what was different. For many of them, it was just I'm not comfortable with this technology. I feel like I'm fighting the tools rather than expressing myself. And I said, well, you probably felt that way when you first started writing using Microsoft Word. You've just familiarized yourself with it to the point that it feels transparent. So whether they liked it or not, we were able to turn that into a kind of reflection on the meaning of the medium and the meaning of literacy in a mobile world.

KENNEALLY: We are here at the TAA Conference, and you are probably trying to evangelize with the conference attendees regarding this topic. I think you feel that it's important for instructors, for textbook authors, to stay current, to not find their skills atrophying, to really be doing the kinds of things you're talking about – not because it's a market issue, but because it's really an educational issue.

GREER: And it's also an accessibility issue. You mentioned the blind student. I think also if you think of working students – many of my students are full-time. They're parents. They log into class in the middle of the night. They might be at their daughter's gymnastics practice. So being able to pull up the phone and check in on what was the reading assignment for this week – I mean, it literally gives them access to the course content that they did not have before. So that in itself, I think, is one very good reason.

But I also think we need to go where the students are. They are clearly on mobile. We know they spend more time on mobile than they do on desktop or in print. So I think it's a matter of serving the audience and educating students in the way that they need and want to be educated. Of course, that's the goal of what we do in educational publishing, is we try to meet people's needs, not give them what we think they need. We need to give them what they want.

And I think it's been a little frustrating. I think a lot of the larger commercial textbook publishers have been a little slow to respond. Partly that's because of institutional inertia, and partly that's because they're still thinking – as we do, we think of the new in terms of the old. There's a natural tendency to compare mobile to print and think of it as a tiny book. I'm encouraging people to take a step back and say, what is mobile doing that is different, and how can we honor it in its own language and its own technology, as opposed to thinking of it as some inferior version of a printed book?

KENNEALLY: And we don't even have to guess at what's happening, because with the technology comes the data – the opportunity to really dive in and understand how the students are consuming the content, the kinds of things they are clicking on, and so forth. Talk about the way that the analytics is really important here.

GREER: Well, one of the best places I could send people is to Mary Meeker's famous Internet Trends Report that came out in the last few weeks with the 2018 data. She looks at how people, for example, are using YouTube. 70% of people visiting YouTube's site are looking to learn how to do something, whether that's how to change an air filter in their car to how to design a mobile app. They are hungry for learning. And the theme of lifelong learning is one of the things that the data and the analytics is showing. People are turning to the internet for videos and for tutorials of all different sorts.

She also reports that the average length of time that an American in 2018 spends on digital media today is about 5.9 hours. More than three of those hours are on mobile. So more than 50% of the total time of experiencing media today is through the mobile platform. We've long passed the point where it was 50/50 mobile versus laptop. We know now that most website visitors in the world are coming on mobile phones. That trend seems to be accelerating a little bit this year.

But the other interesting thing that her analytics revealed is that mobile phones have almost reached a saturation point. This was the first year in which the rate of

growth did not increase. The reason is not that people are souring on their mobile phones. The reason is that everybody's already got one. (laughter) So you've reached basically 99% market penetration with mobile phones, which is the fastest consumer technology ever adopted in the history of technology. It's mind-boggling to think that this gadget called the mobile phone or the iPhone is 10 years old this year.

KENNEALLY: And I would imagine we are reaching many of our listeners on an iPhone or a smartphone, and we certainly appreciate the chance to share with them your views of the way that mobile technology is changing not only their listening habits, but also perhaps their children's learning habits.

We've been speaking today with author, educator, and editor Michael Greer. Michael, thank you for joining me on Beyond the Book.

GREER: Thanks very much. It's always a joy, Chris. Thanks.

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Beyond the Book co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on Beyond the Book.

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