University Students and Technologies: Usage, Consumption and Future Trends in the Educational Context

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Keywords: Facebook, Internet, University, University Students, Web 2.0

ABSTRACT

This paper presents and discusses data on the use of technology in general and of Web 2.0 platforms and services in particular by students at the University of Milano-Bicocca. The data was obtained from a survey on media consumption habits and usage of new web technologies conducted by the university’s Observatory on New Media, NuMediaBiOs. Research of this kind provides a valuable basis for the development, adaptation and improvement of existing services and offerings involving new technologies in educational contexts, given that for new technologies to be successfully integrated it is critical to have access to detailed information about how they are currently deployed by users (in this case, undergraduate students on basic degree programmes). Such analyses have implications for a range of contexts, not least for the public educational institution in which they are carried out, namely the university.

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INTRODUCTION

Information and communication technologies are increasingly becoming an integral component of our daily lives; their large-scale penetration and application are progressively and radically modifying our habits, ways of learning and ways of thinking. In the educational context, the introduction of new technologies is leading to profound changes not only in the way we access knowledge, particularly in terms of the activation and management of learning processes, but also in our way of conducting teaching activities (Cottini, 2007; Cacciamani, 2009). One of the most recent landmark developments in ICT has been the advent of Web 2.0, also known as the “social Web” (Boulos & Wheeler 2007) or “read/write Web” (Hemmi, Bayne, & Land 2009).

Web 2.0 represents both an opportunity and a challenge for teachers (Alexander, 2006; Thompson, 2007; Franklin & Van Harmelen, 2007). Thanks to Web 2.0, learning can become a shared project within which teachers and students collaborate and construct shared learning paths and resources (Rollett, Lux, Strohmaier, Dösinger, & Tochtermann, 2007; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Collis & Moonen, 2008). The sharing architecture provided by this new generation of applications (such as Flickr and Slideshare) enables the user to take on a key role (O’Reilly, 2005). Indeed one of the main characteristics of Web 2.0 is that the users themselves, even if they are not highly skilled in the use of ICT, can add value to the services offered by the Web given that they not only consume contents but can also contribute to creating them (Hemmi, Bayne, & Land 2009; Boulos & Wheeler 2007; Jenkins, 2010), transforming the learning context within which they act and creating their own “personal learning environment” (Attwell, 2007).

This paper presents and discusses data on the use of technology general in general and of Web 2.0 platforms and services in particular, by students at the University of Milano-Bicocca. The data was obtained from a survey on media consumption habits and usage of new web technologies conducted by the university’s Observatory on New Media (NuMediaBiOs). Research of this kind provides a valuable basis for the development, adaptation and improvement of existing services and offerings involving new technologies in educational contexts, given that for new technologies to be successfully integrated it is critical to have access to detailed information about how they are currently deployed by users (in this case, undergraduate students on basic degree programmes). Such analyses have implications for a range of educational contexts, not least for the public institution in which they are carried out, namely the university. Although a number of studies on the use of Web 2.0 platforms and services have been reported in the international literature (Kvavik, Caruso, & Morgan, 2004; Kennedy et al., 2009; Margaryan & Littlejohn, 2009), we believe it to be of the utmost importance to specifically investigate the use made of Web 2.0 by the students at our university, our own target research population, in order to define the educational potential of Web 2.0 within this specific – and Italian – context.

THE SURVEY

This study, now in its third edition (Ferri et al., 2010; 2012) was conducted during the 2011-2012 academic year. Similarly to the previous editions, it involved a quantitative survey of the population of undergraduate students enrolled on basic degree programmes at Milano-Bicocca University. The instrument used was a 33 item questionnaire, divided into six parts: demographic information, relationship with technology, cultural consumption habits, the role of Internet in everyday life, use of Web 2.0 platforms and services in general and of Facebook in particular. The dedicated section on Facebook was a new addition in relation to the earlier editions of the survey; the growing popularity of this social network not only amongst the university student population but throughout society as a whole led us to view it as a phenomenon deserving of more in-depth investigation.

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