Chapter 5
Considering Students’ Perspectives on Personal and Distributed Learning Environments in Course Design

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ABSTRACT
This chapter presents the findings from an experimental postgraduate student-centered course using social media tools and services to support learning. The main aim of this research was to evaluate a course design that was heavily supported by social media. The main aspects of this course design were that students were granted the freedom to select social media tools and services and use them in a personalized way, construct personal and distributed learning spaces, and visualize their conceptual understanding of these environments and their activities. Students’ perceptions of the social media they used were used to evaluate the overall course design. Their perception of the affordances of social media are presented by noting conceptual changes in how they represented the structure of their personal and distributed environments, and by how they rated their learning experience with social media. This chapter concludes with the most important aspects of course design that need to be taken into account in higher education learning environments seeking to integrate Web 2.0 tools.

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INTRODUCTION

The ongoing evolution of the Web has had a great influence on every part of our society, from leisure time and educational life to business and work. In 2004, people began to use the term “Web 2.0” to refer to the new perspective and understanding of the ways software developers and end-users use the Web (O’Reilly, 2005). Though there is considerable discussion about the appropriateness of the term Web 2.0 and its definition, the main idea is that the Web and its applications are increasingly used for creativity enhancement, information sharing, collaboration among users, and social networking. In other words, Web 2.0 attempts to capture the economic value of social interaction (Barnwal, 2007). The term “social media” (sometimes called “Web 2.0 applications”) refers to applications that support customized information retrieval, personalized aggregation and monitoring, and joint publication, sharing, and interaction (Owen, Grant, Sayers & Facer, 2006). Social media generally provide open and free access to web content, connection-building, and networking opportunities for people with common interests (MacManus & Porter, 2005). Social media tools and services are providing and shaping the cultural tools that serve as “carriers” of socio-cultural patterns and knowledge (Wertsch, 1994). Thus, this new trend in the use of web technology makes it even harder to escape the implications of social networking tools for learning (Candy, 2002).

Without doubt, many of our activities have moved to the Web, which offers a medium for a number of tasks we deal with every day in the home, community, office, library, etc. There is a constant flow of new web-based tools and services, applications, and terminology (Candy, 2002). The landscape of web tools and services is continuously complemented with a new generation of open source and open access social media tools, services, and enhancements (e.g., delicious as an example of social bookmarking tools; LinkedIn and Facebook for community-building environments; wiki applications for collaborative work; photo-, music-, and video-sharing tools such as Flickr, YouTube). Today, people are regularly confronted with the challenge of finding the most appropriate solutions with available resources and tools. Understanding how and where to get adequate information and resources, how to filter, interpret and use information effectively, and how to produce, exchange, and transmit information has become an important set of skills in today’s society (Candy, 2002). Increasingly, learners must also be able to support these activities with web-based technologies and make informed choices about various online tools and services. Thus, we increasingly rely on applications and development of Web technology that can mediate our activities (Fiedler & Pata, 2009).

This chapter examines an innovative course design in higher education with the aim of investigating students’ experiences with regard to the use of social media tools and services for supporting their study activities. The chapter gives an overview of the course design and students’ perceptions of the affordances of their learning environments. Based on data collected on these perceptions, conclusions are drawn regarding the overall course design.

USING WEB 2.0 TOOLS IN EDUCATION

From an educational point of view, emerging web technologies present new challenges and requirements for both educators and students. Although most new technologies are not designed specifically for educational purposes, educators must be aware (and raise their students’ awareness) of current web-based tools, services, and resources.

New technologies are causing many educators to rethink pedagogy and current learning and teaching models. Some, drawing from the term Web 2.0, have labeled new educational
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