Chapter 13

Higher Education Institutions and Digital Identity: New Needs, New Skills?

Mónica Aresta  
Universidade de Aveiro, Portugal  
Carlos Santos  
Universidade de Aveiro, Portugal  
Luís Pedro  
Universidade de Aveiro, Portugal  
António Moreira  
Universidade de Aveiro, Portugal

ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the concepts of social software, digital identity, learning, and education and how they feed into SAPO Campus, an institutionally supported Personal Learning Environment that provides its users with a high level of freedom in the use of Web 2.0 services. Depicted as a social media platform for Higher Education, the SAPO Campus project is described in its various facets, services, and relationships with other entities, making a case for user-generated content production and aggregation for use in Higher Education. It also debates the ever increasing demand for the inception of institutional tools that are especially designed to support the construction of the digital identities of its members, letting go of the stubborn molding features offered centrally – disregarding its user’s presence in communities and/or services that are outside its influence – but that still are at the core of each and every academia member’s digital life.

INTRODUCTION

Personal Learning Environments (PLE) refer to a set of services, tools and communities - gathered in an individual educational platform - that learners use in order to direct and pursue their own learning goals. As an institutionally supported PLE, SAPO Campus provides its users with a high level of freedom in the use of Web 2.0 services. This use includes content publishing and aggregation, but also the capacity of dynamically (re)building an e-portfolio. By doing so SAPO Campus directly offers its users the possibility of promoting and managing their Digital Identity in a broad scenario that is not constrained by institutional walls. Therefore, SAPO Campus can promote new Digital Identity managing-related skills that are woven together with users’ learning concerns and responsibilities. This chapter discusses these issues, connecting the use of an institutionally...
supported PLE with Digital Identity skills development. We will present real data about these topics gathered from an ongoing case study with graduate students using SAPO Campus.

**SOME THOUGHTS AND CONCERNS**

**About Social Software**

With the development of Web 2.0 tools, the Internet became a platform where content, rather than being transmitted and consumed, is created, shared and processed (Downes, 2005). This (r)evolution brought deep changes in the way individuals learn, share, communicate with each other and construct their own knowledge (Downes, 2005; Siemens, 2008; Greenhow et al, 2009).

By fostering the establishment of connections between individuals, the new participatory Web emphasizes the users contribution in creating and organizing information, an approach visible in the exchange of ideas, learning with and through peers and in the collaborative creation of new knowledge (Chatti et al, 2007).

In a context where social software tools reshape the traditional model of knowledge creation and transmission, the Web provides a space that allows learning and online presence to arch over many spaces, no longer limited and defined by institutions (Warburton, 2008; Santos, 2009).

The Web can then be seen as both a setting and a support for both formal and informal learning. Learners take responsibility for their own learning and information and knowledge appear as personal and distributed processes created through social interaction (Tredinnick, 2006).

**About Identity**

*Identity is an ambiguous and slippery term (Buckingham, 2008:1).*

The word *identity* has its roots in the Latin term *idem*, meaning “the same” (Turkle, 1995; Buckingham, 2008). Nevertheless, it is almost impossible to dissociate identity from the social context where it is built.

Individuals are, simultaneously, a product of their own biography and the reflection of the social context and people they interact with (Buckingham, 2008), a duality that makes *identity* a fluid and almost endlessly negotiable concept (ib, 2008). This *negotiated identity* (Boyd 2002) results from the social process by which individuals relate with each other: “While interacting socially, people are aware of and react to the feedback that they receive by the other people in an environment” (Boyd, 2002:22).

People walk through different social environments managing the different aspects of their identity (Boyd, 2002), creating what can also be described as a “*personal and social bricolage*” (Weber et al, 2008). It does not mean, however, that the identity is inherently fragmented (Boyd, 2002); it means that it can be seen as a puzzle, a work-in-progress that involves both social and personal dimensions of the identity: “Identities, whether individual or collective, are not unitary wholes cut out of a single cloth – they are constructed in action, using whatever cultural and life material is at hand” (Weber et al, 2008:43).

When transposed to online environments, the concept of *identity* as a distributed profile becomes even more evident. In a space where identity is disembodied (Downes, 2008), the development of an online identity can be encouraged by the network’s participatory abilities (Greenhow et al, 2009).

As a social laboratory where people can test and work on the constructions and reconstructions of the “self” (Turkle, 1995), the Internet opened many ways of interaction, communication and the construction of communities (Buckingham, 2008): “On it, people are able to build a self by cycling through many selves” (Turkle, 1995:178).
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