Chapter 6

Online Learning Communities: Use of Micro Blogging for Knowledge Construction

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ABSTRACT

This chapter highlights the potential of educational microblogging as a mediation system to support the process of distance learning. In their experimental approach, the authors conducted participant observations with university students who used their pedagogical device over the course of two semesters. Students participated through peer-to-peer and peer-to-peer to tutor interactions that took place within the academic and personal spheres. In the research corpus, the communitarian dynamic of social networks combined with playful immersion is a fruitful heuristic for individualizing learning paths and strengthening student dedication and commitment. The digital ethnographic participant observations revealed that the sharing and dissemination of information via microblogging allowed the creation of new collaborative methods and development of a culture of participation within the community of student learners. The use of sociotechnical devices such as Twitter and microblogging have proven to be excellent tools for accustoming students to Web 2.0 technologies and ensuring optimal participation in the learning process. This chapter unveils a successful approach to constructing a digital ecosystem where social interactions are initiated (during real-time synchronous educational sessions) and extended outside of academic boundaries into the private sphere. The sociotechnical mediation that the authors have created around Twitter has proven to be very effective in linking these two spatio-temporally contiguous entities for the benefit of learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

Similar to the planetary village designed in the 1960s by some of the most renowned visionary theorists, the Internet has acted as a melting pot of digital technologies present in societies around the world and developed an interconnected dynamic of all socioeconomic sectors. In making reference to Wikipedia, open source, creative Commons and other General Public Licenses (GPL), Yochai Benkler affirms that “Social production is a real fact, not a fad” (Benkler, 2006). We are finished
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with the ancestral pattern of building information and knowledge that has been existent for over 150 years! Now is the time of social cooperation in a collaborative dimension that has never ceased to enrich socio-constructivist precepts. The “wisdom of crowds⁵” is the new model. Some argue that globalization is at the heart of the industrial economic models transition to an economy based on knowledge. By being connected on a worldwide scale, every day individuals have become innovative actors, creators of wealth and sustainable business models (Tapscott & Williams, 2008).

In this chapter, we describe these new modes of production and access to knowledge as connectivism that has been generating special interests in higher education. In his new paradigm, the use of digital technologies affect both the value attributed to the content and the modes of mediation themselves (Pédauque & Melot, 2006). At a time when the redistribution of roles is occurring, we assume that microblogging proposes a dialogical style and manner of communication that is coherent with the habits our students display in their current virtual communities. After a review of key literature⁶, we describe the mediation device that we used in our experiments with university students carried out through participant observations over two semesters with university students in a distance-learning program.

PART 1: FROM THE INFORMATION SOCIETY TO KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES

1.1. A Digital Revolution in Progress

The challenge of the digital environment is connecting the individual to the collective whole. The growing availability and accessibility of information communication technologies (ICTs) has provided a vast array of devices that permit effective distant collaborations. Assistance has always existed in the sphere of family and friends, and it has been spontaneously deployed to the global scale via the web and socio-digital networks. It is the same principle of social networking that has played a key role in organizational learning, innovation, access to key information and even the process of business creation. Granovetter’s “Strength of Weak Ties” theory (Granovetter, 1973) provides the basis of social networking for professional purposes⁷ by suggesting that weak ties (simple acquaintances) enable reaching populations and audiences that are not accessible via strong ties; thus enabling access to potentially richer sources of information. Similarly, Stanley Milgrams “small world experiment” (Pool, Milgram, Newcomb, & Kochen, 1989) led to the development of the “six degrees of separation” theory, which indicates the potential paths for getting into contact with someone, via intermediary contacts present in our respective relational networks. Forty years after the founding of these theories, we can measure how this interconnectedness provides the basis for new forms of production such as collective intelligence (Lévy, 1994) and “the wisdom of crowds⁸” (Surowiecki, 2004). These new forms of production are not an intrinsic phenomenon singularly applicable to any particular social group; associations, nongovernmental organizations, public institutions and businesses alike have the power to harness these

Figure 1. From individual to collective emulation
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