ICT-Enabled Learning Settings: Course, Person or Community?

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ABSTRACT

The paper presents a discussion on the different approaches that the authors have found in learning settings respect to ICT platforms that support the educational activities. The authors discuss three different approaches in pursuing learning activities in real educational contexts. The considered approaches are different in the sense of the metaphor used. The approaches related to LMSs follow the metaphor of “course”, while in the approaches related with web 2.0 technologies (like Facebook™, Twitter™, Flickr™ etc), the founding metaphor is the individual with its social networks. Finally, the third approach has its building blocks in the idea of (virtual) community and virtual communities systems, where the core paradigm of the platform is the (virtual) community that offers specialized services for the purpose of the community to the enrolled members, and where the subject is just a participant that adheres to the rules of the community, with duties, rights, tasks to do and objectives to achieve. The authors will discuss all these three approaches, the different levels of applicability in learning settings, and specifically the potential of the virtual communities-based system that they adopted in the experimentations conducted in the last ten years.

Keywords: Educational Activities, E-Learning, ICT Platforms, Social Networks, Virtual Communities

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article, we will present our experience as designers, developers and administrators of a virtual communities management system, called “On Line Communities” (OLC) that we are using in learning settings since 2002. Initially, the platform has been substantially used as a replacement of an pre-existing e-Learning system (LMS) used by the Faculty of Economics of the University of Trento based on the metaphor of “course”, as at the time we have no low-cost, widely used LMSs like today. We discussed in Colazzo, Molinari, and Villa (2008) and Colazzo, Conte, Molinari, and Villa (2007) the main differences caused by the change of metaphor in a LMS. We recently managed the evolution of the system towards the provision of what we called a “Personal Learning Space” (PLS) to the user. This approach is, at first sight, quite similar to the web 2.0 and social networks interaction spaces. In this way, we

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passed through the three different possibilities that are used today by educational institutions to support educational settings: LMSs (properly named), Social networks and Virtual communities systems.

LMSs are software platforms that conceptually put the “course” at the center of the system, and the user finds itself “included” in a box (the course) where educational activities are available depending on the decision of the teacher. These well-known software platforms (like Moodle™ or Blackboard™) put the “course” at the center of the system, adding services and tools for expanding the capabilities of the system to support learning and (sometimes) collaboration activities. Accordingly to this, these systems substantially have a “course-centric” approach to service provision, as their original main purpose, where the whole architecture of the system is grounded, is to support educational tasks.

Social networks (like Facebook™, Twitter™, Flickr™, etc.) are web sites where the network of social relationships of the users is put in the center of the system (or better, at the center of the interest of the owners of the platform). The success of these platforms, has convinced some educational institutions, teachers and tutors to use them for educational purposes. On the research and experimentation side, researchers of learning and teaching techniques based on new technologies have been naturally attracted by the many possibilities offered by the evolution of the ICTs towards social settings. The main reason for this is probably the widespread conviction that the learning process is a social phenomenon. Normally, different shadings exist, from strong positions like, “learning is only a social process,” to lighter positions like, “learning is also a social process.” The first stronger position is scientifically not sustainable. Indeed, learning processes exist and have been studied for a long time (like imprinting, addiction, awareness) which are not definable “social”. The other position sets the issue: how should the software be built in order to facilitate social aspect of learning?

In general, there is an agreement about the social component in the learning processes, and therefore it is almost automatic to assist to the debate around the so-call e-learning 2.0, as an evolution of the old-style e-learning 1.0 (first generation of e-learning) towards a greater social and participatory sense. We believe that this debate is often generated by a profound misunderstanding about the differences between real sociality and sociality mediated on ICTs.

The thought of McLuan’s (the media is the message) (McLuhan, 1964) has a double consequence: forces software (the media) producers to apply coherence in the application field of reference (the message), and forces users that choose the software (the media) to choose an adequate one respect to the task (the message).

Here we would like to distinguish the power of social networks in the literal sense, as a social phenomenon in e-learning, from the implementation of this sociological concept that Web 2.0 has done. On one side, we have a network of people collaborating to a common objective, managing relationships and exchanging their experiences, and this is a long studied concept in sociology that in recent years has been updated thanks to ICT-mediated networks.

Another perspective is the usage of these software platforms (with concepts like “friendship”, “friends”, “groups” as building blocks of the interaction) in educational settings. It seems, in our opinion, that some educational institutions are using Facebook™ and similar platforms more due to their success among young persons, rather than a precise and well-designed usage for educational purposes.

Of course, we are not denying the enormous potential of social interaction in learning settings: the Web 2.0 and e-learning 2.0 are building blocks of many educational activities, but we would like to distinguish the concept of social network, collaboration (blogs, wiki, user-generated contents etc.), from the implementation that has been done in social network platforms, and from the usage that (due to this implementation) the educational institutions are doing with them.
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