

Ideas in Mobile Learning symposium - 1000 word 'idea' paper abstract

The project "Learn to teach by Social Web": A Framework for Social Media based Learning in the Classroom

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This paper presents our experience in developing an online curriculum dedicated to promoting the use of social media in an educational context on a European scale. We describe 'social media based learning' as a new form of using old technology. Our focus is not based on the technology itself but rather the engagement with technology that positions this as a social innovation. The term "social innovation" describes new intentional social practices that are aiming at better satisfying or answering needs and problems. "An innovation is therefore social to the extent that it is socially accepted and diffused (...)" (Howaldt, J. & Schwarz, M. 2010, 26).

We employ this perspective to discuss the new form of connected social learning, using social media as a social innovation – not as a technology - that allows people (even those with low ICT skills) to interact, create and alter content. We set out our understanding of social media as a learning environment, as a space and concentrate on the question how this "space" changes learning, teaching and the world of labour. This space is then shared with others as a communal collaborative environment, and we understand this sharing as learning.

We are mindful that this space does not simply appear, and as if by magic is all at once engaged with as intended, but rather that a degree of support is required to facilitate engagement. If we follow Rogers (1995) in his analysis that the diffusion of innovations can be supported by professional change agents, we can employ his model of innovation diffusion to the social media based learning by styling teachers and students as change agents that fulfil the task of bringing acceptance and competences to learners. Within social media this role differs from the traditional approach of a classroom bound teacher, as social media based learning will set up a demand for specific communicative skills, ICT skills and reflection on the process of co-operation. We argue that social media based learning requires other types of competences – both from student and teacher. More than that, social media based learning will also dissolve the time border between "school" and "leisure" and the role expectations between

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“expert” and “learner”. Zimmer et al expand the role of the teacher in open communication situations:

“people need **enough** individual support, so that they feel safe **enough** to engage in open communication, so that they can arrive at **enough** shared vision, to be able to do things together.”
(Zimmer, Harris & Muirhead, 2000, 3-4)

This is true whether those participating are self acknowledged novices or experts in social media learning.

Starting from these assumptions, we designed the ongoing EU funded Comenius project “Learn to Teach by Social Web” (L2T – www.learn2teach.eu) which sets out to exploit the educational potential that social media offers teachers in engaging their learners in contextual development of skills and knowledge through an ‘alternative’ or unfamiliar learning paradigm. In this case the use of social media becomes the ‘alternative’ collaborative tool that allows participants to engage in innovative learning environments, existing both inside and outside of the classroom.

The discussion held within this project is clearly aware that social media have been in existence for many years, and furthermore that our learners have been engaged in their use for as long. The ubiquitous nature of mobile technology has infiltrated all aspects of our lives. We also recognize however that this does not suggest that either learner, or teacher is comfortable with using such technology in a learning environment. Social media are widely accepted by students as leisure instruments and mobile technology providing an extension of their social world; only rarely being used as learning devices. Even more so for teachers; as illustrated by our small scale research in 2012 (253 respondents across 7 European countries) where we found over two thirds of new or trainee teachers were not confident in the use of e-learning platforms (such as Moodle or BlackBoard) and over three quarters felt uncomfortable with the use of social networking (such as Facebook and Twitter). This indicated to us that there was little or no correlation between our perceived engagement in social/personal use of technology and engagement with technology for learning.

In order to address the gap between the potential pedagogical added value of social media and the societal need to manage competences in mobile communication on one side and the lack of these competences in schools on the other, the L2T project developed a curriculum that provides examples of how to use social media in a range of teaching environments, from the classroom to the workplace to leisure activity. This vocational training curriculum aims at teachers that have never before used social media for educational purposes. To shape this in the most positive way, the curriculum was developed by

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active teachers – many of whom had never used social media before engaging in the project. So our intended outcome is a practice report from teachers for teachers that provides both a sociological introduction into the societal role of social media and very practical lesson examples as inspirations for actual teaching and learning experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom.

Within the project, we utilize different mobile and social media applications (such as wikis, Twitter feeds and Facebook pages) to provide users, both teachers and, through facilitation, the students themselves, with the support required to participate in the collaborative activity of developing effective teaching and learning environments. This runs parallel with Kaletka and Pelka's description of social media in general suggesting it as:

“social innovation that has the potential to influence the way people work, communicate and participate. Furthermore, it fits the upcoming challenges of modern information society with work that has to be fast, cooperative, incremental and dialogue based.” (Kaletka, C & Pelka, B. 2011, 273)

This is a theme at the heart of the 'Learn 2 Teach by Social Web' project, offering a space for teachers to communicate their feelings, apprehensions, insights and stories with others across a wide range of subject areas and locations throughout Europe. This dialogue is one that the project aims to develop beyond the life cycle of the curriculum itself, again relating to the nature of social innovations shaping the future. This is possible through the use of mobile technology in allowing participants opportunity to share ideas via a range of different media.

The curriculum does not aim at explaining how specific applications work (e.g. “how do I set up a Facebook page for my class?”), but links to external resources that handle these questions. It concentrates on inspirational examples for actual teaching, as this is what our research showed teachers demand most. The curriculum lays out a very “hands on” approach to use the pedagogical added value of social media for teaching (i.e. “What benefits does Twitter bring for my lesson?”). The whole curriculum offers a workload of about 100 hours of e-learning, however, modules can be considered separately in order to prepare for specific lessons or focus on the use of specific mobile technology. Our research – from 2012 – suggested that the curriculum should cover the following topics:

1. Social media as a social innovation and conclusions for a pedagogy of social media
2. Specific applications (such as wikis, blogs, social network sites)
3. Specific hardware (such as tablets, mobile phones)

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4. Social media in specific school subjects (math, foreign language...)

Each module of the curriculum follows a simple structure, allowing a fast overview and supporting very concrete examples for individual learning units. Each module offers evidence-based arguments for the background of a topic, its application and further resources for the teacher to follow.

In conclusion, the curriculum enables teachers to employ social media for teaching purposes and so contributes to satisfying the need for structured education in ICT based communication and the need to reflect on the pedagogical added value of social media and mobile learning for educational purposes. It aims at the target group of those who are inexperienced in the use of mobile technology and social media and provides arguments, methods and examples to empower their understanding and development. As a main motive it builds on the argument that school is the best space to empower young people to become ICT competent for a living that will strongly be shaped by ICT mediated communication in both respects of being mobile and social.

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