

Chapter 14

Digital Identity of Researchers 2.0: The Case of Their Personal Learning Network

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ABSTRACT

This chapter results from an investigation into the digital identity of a community of researchers, part of a PhD study on Education focused on Personal Learning Networks (PLN). Today the social web is a massive reality in academic research, which leads to question the importance of the digital presence of researchers in these informal contexts and how they relate to each other. With the evolution of the internet, new challenges are posed to researchers, both socially (social web) and academically. Immersion in these digital environments promotes the development of open research practices, with evidence of interactions between group members, stressing the collaborative way we interact in the context of learning throughout life. Thus, the social web allows the researcher 2.0 to access the work of other researchers quickly and effectively, sharing content and collaborating with others through a PLN. This personal network requires a range of skills related to the digital identity of researchers, considering the environment in which they are operating.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter results from a research project on the digital identity of a community of e-researchers and their Personal Learning Networks, part of a PhD research on Distance Education and Elearning. In the digital age, where the use of the social web by researchers is a massive reality, we consider it necessary to have a better understanding of the way of thinking and acting of this community in informal environ-

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ments, and their relation to formal environments. Researchers, based on a perspective of lifelong learning, consider emerging and informal environments as pedagogical, integrating diverse experiences in different and ubiquitous contexts. In this way, we intend to develop a better understanding of their way of being in those spaces online.

The evolution of the web has produced new challenges to researchers, both socially (social Web) and academically. The social web allows, in daily life, the sharing of interests, resources, thoughts, links, insights, etc., but the fundamental thing is that these interactions enrich the professional, academic and personal level of individuals (Weller, 2011). Immersion in these digital environments promotes and supports the development of open research practices and open innovation (Carey et al., 2015), with evidence for interactions between members of groups, communities and networks (Downes, 2007; Wenger, Trayner & de Laat, 2011) or collectives (Dron & Anderson, 2007), highlighting the collaborative approach in a lifelong learning and professional development context.

Nowadays, the web allows us to have a diversity of interactions through digital platforms that provide a social and sharing space without borders. With the digital age, we experience a new social concept, with reduced geographical barriers and a level of freedom in individual and collective expression never seen before. Things which were unthinkable - someone on the other side of the planet to know us, for example - is today a reality through the keyboard of any mobile device with network access. With six links of our network we can go round the planet. We are increasingly exposed by what we share and by the spaces that we “inhabit” online, that is, by the digital footprint we leave behind. Furthermore, there is also the possibility of others sharing content of our own lives, which makes the network an increasingly rich, more connected and more complex entity.

The emerging environments have collaborative and social characteristics, providing access to excellence in a specific area of interest and promoting innovative ideas on a global scale, through the sharing of educational resources and the development of good educational practices without space and time restrictions. Digital technologies allow the creation of the structure, the definition of the conditions and the building of the right tools for production, management and dissemination of contents (Brown, 2002) and building the researcher PLE (Mota, 2009). The digital evolution thus requires researchers to evolve too, in order to manage their digital knowledge through their personal learning network (PLN), allowing them to contact with new content and to maintain a lifelong learning and professional development process.

In this sense, the PLN requires a set of skills related to the researchers’ digital identity, considering the environment in which they are operating. The fact that researchers build, amplify and manage their PLE and their PLN, leads to the development of a deeper and better awareness of their own personal and academic identity. Only with a strong digital identity can the researcher 2.0 strengthen the network that supports a great part of their learning and their sharing of knowledge (Castañeda & Adell, 2013).

In this chapter we intend to demonstrate that the digital identity of 2.0 researchers is strengthened by their network and digital footprint. Through the chapter we will present the necessary steps to create a strong digital identity by taking advantage of the available social web tools and how the promotion of the personal learning network is important to assemble a digital identity.

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