Social Media-Enhanced Phones for Productive Learning of South African Postgraduate Students

Patient Rambe, University of the Free State, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Despite growing interest in knowledge sharing processes in informal spaces, there is a paucity of research on technology-mediated learning in these spaces. Yet the surge in student use of Social Media-enabled phones presents tremendous opportunities for augmenting learning in privileged, authoritative spaces. This study investigated the potential of Facebook-enabled mobiles to leverage learning in informal learning environments. Third Space Theory illuminated understanding of how students draw on potentially contradictory, multiple “funds of knowledge” in their meaning making and discourses. Twenty six students were interviewed to explore how they exchanged learning resources and collaborated on academic matters. Findings suggest that student appropriation of Facebook-enhanced phones enhances social learning, hones digital literacies, and affords the co-production of knowledge in learning communities. Paradoxically, these educational gains are undermined by the disruptive nature of Social Media and student ambivalence about the blurring of academic (professional) and social divides that creates complex, ‘collapsed contexts.’

Keywords: Facebook-Enabled Phones, Social Convergence, Social Learning, Social Media, Third Space

INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges of teaching large classes in tertiary education is gauging student understanding (Hu et al., 2006; Jaffer, Ng’ambi, & Czerniewicz, 2007). This complexity is compounded by educators’ limited knowledge about educational resources students share and the knowledge building processes they engage in outside classrooms. As such, literature reports the paucity of meaningful, sufficient academic support for students beyond classes and normal consultation hours (Barrett, 2002; Ng’ambi, 2004). However, these challenges should be interpreted in the light of the potential of converged Social Media-enabled phones to render authentic learning resources and meaningful learning experiences for learners. As Attewell (2005) proposes, the delivery of learning materials using a browser on these intelligent devices provides substantial platform independence enabling materials to be easily ported between different existing and predicted devices. We infer that digital convergence affords learners personalised learning environments, and affords mobile learning across varied contexts. Ironically, the perceived benefits of these converged Web-enabled phones remain speculative due
to limited research into the implications of convergence on student meaningful learning.

The discourse on mobile devices has foregrounded how these handhelds influence situated learning in general. Mobile technologies potentially improve access to knowledge for target users and contextualised learning of objects by linking to the Internet via mobile connections and devices (Bormida, Bo, Lefrere, & Taylor, 2003). Mobile and wireless technologies also provide faculty with more flexibility with regard course content delivery through the incorporation of e-learning activities into traditional instruction (Simbulan, 2011). They also present opportunities for sharing knowledge in a dispersed learning environment via different textual modes (Takenaka, Inagaki, Ohkubo, Kuroda, & Doi, 2004).

Social Media learning environments provide new experiences for interactive learning, and are designed to encourage student interaction and participation in a dynamic lecture classroom (Chao, Parker, & Fontana, 2011). Social networking also facilitates engagement between student and academics (Leitch & Warren, 2011) and student networked access to resources.

For some scholars (DiMicco & Millen, 2007; Shuen, 2008), Facebook [-enhanced phones] provide third party functionality and interactive pages that enable Web-searching, blogging, instant messaging, e-mailing and real time functionality (as cited in Leitch & Warren, 2011). In spite of these great promises of Social Media-enhanced phones for transforming learning, their appropriation for pedagogy at South African universities has been disappointingly low. This is notwithstanding university students’ surging uptake of these technologies for macro management of their social and academic lives. For example, 98% of students at the University of Cape Town (UCT) individually own and use mobile phones (Centre for Educational Technology, 2010).

Having articulated the educational value of Social Media-enabled phones, this study investigates the influence of social convergence via these unique phones on student meaningful learning in informal contexts. It draws on a case study of South African university students’ experiences of using Social Media-enabled phones for learning. The rest of the paper is structured as follows: we articulate the meaning of social convergence, provide a literature review, theoretical framework, methodology, data analysis and discussion of student narratives, implications for the study and provide a conclusion.

**Constructing Convergence**

In information technology, “convergence” implies the consolidation of information into a small number of sources (like Google) and integration of multi-functionality like a telephone, display screen, computer, internet access, and video in a single device (Nordmann, 2004, Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, 2011). It denotes “device convergence” as the incorporation of many kinds of extant devices and terminals into a new, converged device with converged services and networks (Kim, Lee, & Koh, 2005). It also entails the integration of multiple sources of digitized content across devices and into single devices with multiple functions (Pearce, 2011). “Social convergence”, on the other hand, is interpreted as the seamless integration of online social networks into the social practices that direct people’s academic/professional activities. Kleinberg (2008) suggests that social networking site artefacts are expressions of broader processes at work, growing movements of connections, virtual communities, and self-expression.

**Literature on Convergence**

**Media Convergence**

One of the affirmative expressions of convergence in technology studies is media convergence. It describes the multiple functions that individual software and hardware have assumed in education and our social lives (Dartmouth Institute for Writing and Rhetoric, 2011). Media convergence entails the seamless integration of diverse digital information into specific
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