

Social Networking and Personal Learning Environment

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INTRODUCTION

In social studies a *social network* is the set of relations that links people, through their interactions and familiarity of various kind. Today, however, social networking indicates a growing phenomenon, characterised by Web technologies that create and keep together groups of people on the basis of common interests. These tools (*social software technologies*) include for instance: blogs, *podcasts*, RSS feeds, social bookmarking, and offer new opportunities to promote collaboration, to assist conversations, to help in the sharing of knowledge, in work and learning contexts, both formal and informal. Although some of these tools are often used in LMSs, the main idea of this new approach is to consider the advantages coming from general purpose tools, widely available on the net, and characterised by an intrinsic vitality and spontaneity. In this context, also linked to a growing criticism of the current e-learning model, based on the extensive use of VLEs (*virtual learning environments*), new proposals oriented towards the definition of new models of Web spaces for personal learning (*personal learning environment* or *virtual learning landscape*) are being put forward. In these new systems the individual has a central place, in a network of resources and of social and friendly interactions that offer support on the emotional as well as on the cognitive level.

SOCIAL-SOFTWARE

In recent years, the availability of services and tools that enhance the creation of Web content by common users has grown enormously. Most of these “personal contributions” implicitly create interactions and connections among individuals on the net. It is not accidental that one talks of *social software*, referring to applications that make possible for people to interact and collaborate on line, particularly to create on-line

communities. “Social software” is a term with a broad meaning, which includes systems and technologies used in various contexts: for this reason Terry Anderson (2005) has introduced the concept of *educational social software*: “*On line tools that support and encourage individuals to learn together with others, maintaining their control over time, space, presence, activities, identity and relationships*”.

In this sense, specific tools such as *wikis* (1) and *blogs*, acquire particular relevance.

Wiki

A Wiki is a special Web site that allows multiple users, to create and edit pages in real time. It has become emblematic of collaborative authoring of hypertextual documents, because one of the most widespread use is to allow different people to work at a distance, concurrently, on the same body of pages interconnected via hyperlinks. The system keeps track of the modifications carried out and of previous versions (*versioning*) making it possible for a coordinator to accept or, if necessary, to reject the changes made by the collaborators. The use of wikis in e-learning is linked to collaboration, the feature that more than anything else distinguishes this technology. In all those instances in which there is a need to collectively write a text, wikis offer a valuable technical solution. Through the versioning mechanism it possible to follow the process of the elaboration of the text, whilst the hyperlink management system allows for the planning and the preparation of complex investigations. The ease with which one can create glossaries, dictionaries, terminological indexes or organized collections of thematic pages, makes it possible, in many subject domains, to develop very interesting research activities. Compared to the traditional face-to-face group work, wikis offer higher capabilities, because they allow a reflection starting from the very textual nature of the product, and the possibility to operate simultaneously amongst many individuals, remotely.

Teachers as well can find wikis very useful for working on projects, preparing articles, putting together course materials. A wiki is ideal, for instance, for collecting proposals and ideas for a conference or within a research project. However, the main strongness of wikis can also be seen as a weak point: the possibility offered to all to modify content. For this reason the majority of sites is somehow monitored to avoid intrusions, spam, and other abuses.

Blog

The term *blog* is the contraction of *Web log*, that is “*a log on the Web*.” Blogs offer the possibility of writing quickly, without having any specific technical knowledge, notes, thoughts, reflections, texts of any kind, in the form of a Web page. The blog is probably the application that marks, more than any other, the transition from the *read only Web* to the *read and write Web*, where everyone can be an author, in addition to being a reader. The user thus writes new articles, whenever the user wishes, giving to the blog its characteristic appearance of a sequence of brief entries, similar to annotations in a diary. The blog is generally open to contributions from other users, who can add comments to the articles (if the author allows it), or can even be managed by many users, with writing rights.

The current use of blogs goes well beyond that of a “diary”. The old “personal homepage” is increasingly giving way to blogs; journalists, public figures, politicians frequently use blogs, both as an extension of articles printed on paper, or as an alternative means of communication. It is a particularly significant phenomenon, because one notices how access to the production of Web content is available now to a large segment of users who were previously excluded. If the “personal Web sites” were generally a prerogative of ICT practitioners, today blogs are published mostly by nontechnical people.

It is very frequent, in addition, the contamination with other tools, such as *podcasting* and systems for archiving and sharing of digital photographs and videos (the new term *videoblog* or *vlog* has already been coined) (2).

The widespread use of these tools has given rise to information indexing and searching services inside what is now referred to as the *blogosphere*. With this “collective name” one indicates the entire blog community that increasingly takes the form of a *social network*. The

majority of blogs are in fact densely interconnected: *bloggers* (3) very frequently read other blogs and link to them, reference them, post comments on them, thus forming a highly animated *agorà*. Blogs can thus become the true individual’s on line “identity”: according to a suggestive expression used by Granieri (2005), the blog is the stable “point of presence of a person”. This is all the more true in personal blogs, when the blog is understood as a collection of content items, that range from professional, to spare time interests; differently from the “thematic” blogs, but still very interesting at the collective level, a multidisciplinary, personal blog can be a holistic representation of the individual, making it possible for him to participate (through cross links) in different social networks. One could hazard saying, that it is the very concept of identity that changes meaning on line, from “belonging to” or “being part of”, it becomes being “linked to...”.

Even in the field of formal learning the use of blogs presents some very interesting features: in the school blogs easily can allow teachers and students to become authors of log-books. This space can be understood also as a store of materials and exercises: an archive, or a course portfolio. Blogs can be an occasion for reflecting on lessons and a place for discussing and study in-depth certain topics.

This is the case of class blogs that enable teachers to actively exploit Internet potentialities, transforming students from passive users into authors.

Blogs have also an important role for providing the means to come into contact with experiences taking place “outside” one’s own class. The coming into contact with research and didactic material developed by other work groups (for example by other schools) can become, in turn, an occasion for reflection and investigation, that teachers can suggest and organize.

In the informal learning context, instead, blogs represent an important space for the dissemination of ideas and research findings. Many researchers and scholars, in the ICT field in particular, use blogs to present and discuss the outline of their inquiry. Finally, other possible uses of blogs are linked to writing, as an introspective tool of investigation and, with its availability on line, to the dynamics of a social space (the *blogosphere*).

Tagging

Tagging is another example of the users’ direct participation in the definition of Web content. In this case,

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