

Chapter 5

Students' Perceptions and Acceptance: Lessons from Two Studies on Social Tools on Collaborative and Collective Learning

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, we witness the formation of social spaces in computers and networks where children, youths and young adults learn, play, socialize and participate in civic life. The question we want to ask is: if this participatory culture of user-generated content in which socially constructed and collective intelligence is to be harnessed, what are the critical success factors that determine the acceptance of this participatory culture in the learning environments? As an illustration, the paper describes two studies focused on tertiary students' perceptions of acceptance of social tools such as Weblogs and instant messaging in facilitating collaborative and collective learning with the aim of tapping onto the collective intelligence of user communities. Congruent to other studies, findings from these two preliminary studies have shown that factors influencing the acceptance of social tools such as Weblogs and instant messaging for learning are dependent on learners' perceptions of usefulness, followed by usability of the social tools. The paper concludes with design implications for socially constructed, learning environments.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The biggest revolution engendered by the Web is happening right before our eyes, due to the evolution of the Web from a one-way information warehouse focusing on access to information by users to a distributed platform for collaboration in which content is created and shared for free among users. Social networks layered on top of digital networks are transforming business models and our very lifestyles. With new digital technologies on the Web leading to new communication practices, Jenkins et al (2006) called this new phenomenon where barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement are bypassed “participatory culture”.

In recent years, we witness the formation of social spaces in computers and networks where children, youths and young adults learn, play, socialize and participate in civic life. In these spaces, people present themselves, meet with other people, exchange news, play games together, do business, or jointly look for information. Examples of such social networking spaces include blogs (e.g. Blogger), wikis (e.g. Wikipedia), social networking (e.g. MySpace), media sharing (e.g. YouTube) and social tagging (e.g. del.icio.us), among many others. Hoschka (1998) introduced the term “Social Web” to describe the shift from using computers and the Web as simple cooperation tools to using the computer as a social medium.

With the development of the Internet and its widespread use, the opportunity to contribute to community-based knowledge spaces on the Web, such as Wikipedia, is greater than ever before. These new forms of space for action and interaction could not have been predicted by conventional economics because the content is generated by users voluntarily. Such spaces create real economic value and form new kinds of habitats resulting in “social production” or “commons-based peer production” (Benkler, 2006).

Information technology (IT) and the Internet have made inroads into teaching and learning in

higher education. Students accustomed to a high degree of IT and Internet penetration in daily life have themselves come to expect schools to use IT and the Internet to deliver education. Further, the current trend in education away from instructor-centred teaching and towards student-centred learning (Wrede, 2003) has necessitated corresponding changes to delivery modes and instructional design, and have prompted instructors to look towards IT- and Web-based tools for solutions.

For example, there is an increasing focus on developing adaptive environments in which socially constructed, collaborative and peer learning are investigated. Current information technology tools (ICTs) of communication tools are getting more sophisticated and powerful, enabling humans to interact, share and collaborate with ease and speed. To respond to the need that human interactions are equally important in the virtual space as it is in traditional classroom setting, a variety of social software has been developed to facilitate student-teacher and peer-to-peer interactions. Connell (2004) and Boyd (2003) contend that generally accepted definitions of social software are those that address the desire of individuals to be pulled into groups to achieve goals and feature support for conversational interaction between individuals or groups, support for social feedback, and/or support for social networks. Kaplan-Leiserson (2003) argues that while the initial focus of e-learning was on the technology that drove it, these new social software tools are being adapted from those used by teens and business people to keep in touch, collaborate and learn from each other.

The question we want to ask is: if this participatory culture of user-generated content in which socially constructed and collective intelligence is to be harnessed, what are the critical success factors that determine the acceptance of this participatory culture in the learning environments?

As an illustration, the two studies were focused on tertiary students to answer the question on identifying factors that might influence the ac-

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