Learning from the Stream. An "M" Case Study: M for microblogging, m(y)-conference/m(y)-event, and micro/m(y)-learning

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Abstract
Even at first glance there seems to be only a linguistic connection between microblogging and m(y)-conference/m(y)-event, the recent literature registered an upward curve in the number of papers that analyse the usage of microblogging as a community event tool. While the vast majority of studies are investigating the use of the most popular microblogging application Twitter for group communication, the impact on group participants, quantitative analysis of message types, and motivational aspects, there are few research and case studies that address the use of microblogging for learning from informal conversational flow (learning from the stream). In this context, this paper aims to examine: "How the micro-connection to a specific event can enhance the learning experience of students enrolled in formal university courses?"

Keywords: microblogging, stream, higher education

1 Introduction

Even at first glance there seems to be only a linguistic connection between microblogging and conferences / events, the recent literature registered an increased number of papers that analyse the usage of microblogging as a community event tool. The usage may fall in one of the following categories:

- information interfaces (Sutton, 2010; Kwak et al, 2010; Mendoza et al, 2010)
- communication before, during and after the event (Balcom, 2007; Reinhardt et al, 2009; Ebner and Reinhardt, 2009; Ebner et al, 2010) between participants, organizers, presenters and audience
- monitoring the event for non-participants (reporting / online coverage the event) (Ebner et al, 2010; Saunders et al, 2009)
- presentation (Mitchell, 2009)
- collaborative keynotes (Hart, 2010)
- participation / engaging audience (Atkinson, 2009; Harry et al, 2009)
- live-blogging session / instant discussions (Ebner and Reinhardt, 2009)
- live annotations of a broadcast media event (Shamma et al, 2009)
- official / quasi-official / unofficial back-channel (Ebner and Reinhardt, 2009)
- persistent / mobile / mobilizing backchannel (McNely, 2009)
- messages transcription / twitter subtitling (Du et al, 2010)
- back-chatting (Yardi, 2006/2008; Osmond, 2009), and even
- for evaluation (Ebner et al., 2010; Shamma et al, 2010),
and may also belong to a variety of settings: professional, academical / educational, scientifical, or for specific organisational purposes (McNely, 2009; Letierce et al, 2010).

These events use different digital / social media technologies / applications / platforms and several formats (e.g., (un) keynotes, multi / poster sessions, workshops, roundtable discussions, social events, etc.). Usually the participants use hashtags for the events / topics findability across different social platforms.

1.1 Paper Contributions

While the vast majority of studies are investigating the use of Twitter for group communication, the impact on group participants, quantitative analysis of message types, and motivational aspects, there are few research and case studies that address the use of microblogging for learning from informal conversational flow.

In this context, this paper aims to examine: "How the micro-connection to a specific event can enhance the learning experience of students enrolled in formal university courses?" We will answer this question by exploring the integration of the "PLE Conference 2010" information flow into the microblogging platform cirip.eu.

2 Facilities of the microblogging platform Cirip.eu

Cirip.eu, a microblogging platform designed for education and business, was launched in the spring of 2008, by Timsoft, a company specialized in eLearning and mobile applications, under the coordination of the second author.

Besides the facilities of a microblogging platform, Cirip.eu provides the following (Grosseck and Holotescu, 2010):

- Embedding multimedia objects in notes: images, audio and (live) video clips, live-streaming, presentations, files, google docs and forms, cognitive visualizations as diagrams, learning designs as mindmaps etc.
- Sending and receiving messages via the web, mobile, SMS, IM (Yahoo and Jabber), e-mail, Firefox/Chrome extensions, API, Twitter, RSS, desktop and other 3rd party applications, etc.
- Creating public or private user groups. Collaboration groups can be created between the participants in an event, members of a class or university year, for a course enhancement or in order to run an entire online course. Groups have an announcements section (Group News), where moderators can post notes and materials such as SCORM/LOM objects, for group activities.
- Domain specification for microblogs and groups. This simplifies the search for microblogs or groups of a certain domain, for example educational microblogs or groups used for online courses or workshops.
- Monitoring RSS feeds for sites, blogs, social networks or search feeds.
- Tagging the content.
- Creating and conducting polls and quizzes (which can be answered online or by SMS).
- Visualizing statistics and representations of the users/groups interaction networks.

The interface is provided in Romanian, English and German, facilitating an international collaboration, around 8% of the 15000 users being foreigners.

Cirip.eu integrates a wide range of Web2.0 applications and social networks organized around educational resources, many of them in Top 100 Tools for Learning 2009, compiled by Jane Hart from Centre for Learning & Performance Technologies. The Cirip.eu platform also features in this top.

The integration of Web2.0 applications and social networks is realized in order to encourage, organize and simplify their usage by the members (teachers, trainers, students and other learners);
we can say Cirip.eu offers an openness to OERs (Open Educational Resources). Thus, the multimedia objects become part of the conversation/communication flow of the platform, and of the members’ microblogs/portfolios.

3 Learning from the stream. Case study

3.1 Framework
In the 2nd semester of the academic year 2009-2010, the two authors have run the following courses in private groups: "Computer Assisted Instruction" with freshmen of the Pedagogy Department of West University of Timisoara, respectively "Multimedia" with college juniors of University Ion Slavici and "New Educational Technologies", a continuous training course for teachers at University Politehnica of Timisoara.

Social Learning and Personal Learning Environments (PLE) were common topics of the three courses curriculum, and related materials were presented in the courses groups. Also, six students, divided in two working teams, taking part in the "Multimedia" course, had to develop collaborative projects related to PLE.

During the semester the first PLE Conference was planned out, and eventually took place in Barcelona during the month of July. The two authors decided to use in their courses, for documentation and research the conference-related content and informal interactions on different social networks.

On January 8th, 2010, when the first call of papers for the PLE Conference (http://pleconference.citilab.eu) was launched, the PLE / PLE Conference in Barcelona group was open on cirip.eu (Figure 1), at http://cirip.ro/grup/plebcn and will remain active until the last echo of this event will fade away.

The members of this group facilitated by the two authors are students, and also teachers, practitioners in education, trainers, and other persons interested in the PLE domain (Figure 2).

The aims of the group were:
- to be a source of real-time information, connections with practitioners worldwide
- to constitute a framework for learning / communication / sharing in the PLE domain for the students in our courses, but also for other members interested in this domain
- to offer an environment for strengthening knowledge in this domain and new PLE related experiments for the authors
- to offer access to all the group content, visualizations and statistics for future reflections and studies.

3.2 Content for student activities
The group messages consist of:
- tweets referring to the PLE Conference, imported using the Twitter search API (the searched terms are PLE_BCN OR "PLE Barcelona" OR "PLE Conference" OR pleconference.citilab.eu),
- blogs posts which mention the conference, found using the Twingly search engine API, by searching “PLE Conference Barcelona”
- multimedia notes sent by the cirip members who joined this group (Figure 3).
This way the group is a backchannel of the PLE Conference and its messages reflect the interaction/debate on cirip.eu and in a worldwide community concerning PLE and conference.

The actual number of messages on twitter and blogs could be higher than the ones imported, the difference could be explained by Twitter and Twingly APIs limitations, but also by the specified search terms.

The content of the group and its information flow on PLE were enlarged with:

- specific requirements for students' activities and materials related to PLE posted by the facilitators in the group Announcements section;
- feeds/search feeds on PLE topic monitored by the group members using the platform corresponding facility; they are delicious.com feeds with ple, pln, ple_bcn tags, also the feed corresponding to the collection built by the group members, using the ple_Cirip tag (Figure 2).

3.3 Students' activities

Students' activities related to documentation and collaborative projects were organized in five stages and were hosted online by the PLE group, and by the private spaces of the two working teams; a few activities were also discussed face-to-face (f2f) in the laboratories. In completing their tasks, the students used the advanced facilities of cirip.eu.

Because the semester ended prior to when the conference was held, participation in the PLE group during and after the conference was an optional activity, performed especially by students interested in the fields of PLE and social learning for diploma thesis. Thus, once again, it was proved on cirip.eu that learning communities continue their collaboration after the course ends.

Students' activities were grouped in five stages ((M) are specific activities for Multimedia course):

a. preliminary documentation – online and f2f
   - preliminary documentation related to PLE and task understanding - information published by authors in the News section of the PLE group
   - familiarisation with the PLE group, understanding the stream integration
   - open private groups for the two working teams (M);

b. documentation and interactions in the PLE group - online
   - follow group messages (online or by SMS), identify key experts, main discussion topics, types of messages and resources - for these activities the group sections Messages, Members, TagCloud, but also statistics and search facilities came in useful (Figure 4) commenting interesting posts and resources
Figure 3. Message sent by a student, embedding a slideshare presentation

- send (multimedia) messaging containing new resources
- interact with colleagues, facilitators, other group members
- track specific feeds described above - online or by SMS
- participate in a survey related to possible definitions of PLE (M) - online or SMS reply
- each team has closely followed two key actors, identifying their work, entering virtually in their "research laboratories" (M);

C. Collaborative work – online and f2f (M)

- comment a video related to PLE by sending messages in the two teams’ groups; the messages were exported as a .srt file by the specific facility of cirip.eu, and used to subtitle the video published on dotsub.com
- final projects published as collaborative Google docs, embedded in messages; the projects evaluated a few multimedia resources, and the work of the followed experts;

D. Activities evaluation – online and f2f

- conclusions related to the value of the PLE resources discovered
- discussions on how students’ own PLEs were developed and enlarged during the interaction with the stream;

E. Optional activities - online

- interactions and documentation during and after the conference.
Conclusions

By using the cirip.eu platform, we proposed and facilitated a new and challenging form of social learning, a new dimension of openness: learning from the stream, integrating a conference stream in higher education courses. The aim of our study was to make a preliminary evaluation, our findings can only lay the foundation for the elaboration of further and more thorough research. However, our explorative study leaded to several positive results.

Students taking part in different courses from three different universities have interacted with the stream, having common activities; thus this experiment is an affirmative answer to the question “their tweets can reach other communities, in addition to their own?” (Leterce et al., 2009).

Stream integration in the PLE group allowed an uniform interaction, with the same communication mechanisms used by the students in the course group. Continuous facilitation and communication with our students were needed because we could not estimate a priori the development of the ongoing stream volume, dynamics, and content.

Our students appreciated that learning from the stream proved to be a novel and efficient method for documentation and research on PLE, meaning an openness to real-time and valuable content, resources, and also an opportunity to follow experts and practitioners, being an illustration of open and social learning.

The scenario of learning from the stream was presented as a mindmap in the learning design group (Holotescu and Grosseck, 2010); the discussions with teachers, students, practitioners revealed other educational contexts in which such stream integration can be achieved, but also alternative and additional applications that can be used for integration.

The archived content and interactions, statistical data, and visualisations, limited here by the paper length, can be accessed at http://cirip.ro/grup/plebcn, and used in future courses, documentation, and studies. Therefore, the group can be considered not only a time capsule of the worldwide practitioners’ interaction concerning PLE and the PLE Conference, but also a learning experience, important in PLE documentation. Moreover, we can speak about a learning serendipity, which may provide substance for further research projects.

References


