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Mobile open social language learning: towards a paradigm shift

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Abstract

The authors have undertaken a combination of theoretical analysis together with reflection on a range of practical applications and explorations of mobile, social and open learning, over the years, leading them to the conclusion that a new language learning paradigm, Mobile Open Social Language Learning (MOSLL for short), is required. This new paradigm is not the vanishingly small intersection of yet another Venn diagram of modern digital learning, purporting to be the next framework or model. The critique is based on the need to build a new form of learning, one based on the epistemological foundations of society. These epistemological foundations actually vary from culture to culture, from country to country. Each community has its own history of and trends for knowing and learning. This new paradigm, MOSLL, as a result of the arguments developed in this article, is based upon the following axiom, subject to improvement and revision: *In most societies today, characterised by permanent, ubiquitous and pervasive connectedness and mobility, language and learning and digital technology are no longer separable or discrete; they are simply and merely manifestations and aspects of the ways things are now.* Thus, the consequences of articulating this paradigm should be the formulation of the associated research agenda, the scholarly community and the foundational texts that are part of it. The authors have already started this process in the SWITCHED-ON[1] project and other related work and projects, the object of which is to work toward the validation of the hypothesis that its apparent predecessor or component educational paradigms, namely mobile learning, social learning, and open learning applied to languages, are now inadequate, and that a *paradigm shift* is necessary.

Keywords: Mobile Learning; Social Learning; Open Learning; Language Learning Paradigms; MOSLL

1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning as a pedagogic practice suffers from a lack of response to the fluidity and fragmentation of language and from a lack of recognition

that personal digital technologies are not dumb or inert or passive conduits and receptacles of language, but are now deeply complicit in the transformation of language and its social and epistemological context. As a discipline, language learning embraces a rather unique and broad demographic and economic field of application, one populated by publishers and educational institutions, with a different take on change and shift, currently governed by a range of very specific business models. The latter seem stuck in a plethora of apps and courses. Modern language learning has been subsumed, to a considerable extent, into the individual paradigms of mobile, social, and open learning. In this article, a case is made for the way in which the mutual support and interaction provided by combining these paradigms can lead to a new one, that of Mobile Open Social Language Learning (henceforth, MOSLL), argued to be more insightful and promising for overcoming the limitations and problems present in each individual paradigm.

2. MOBILE LEARNING

Mobile learning has been defined in a range of ways that, in essence, refer to the use of mobile technology for activities related to learning and the acquisition of new knowledge, skills and competences (Sharples, 2000; Chinnery, 2006; Sharples, 2007; Shield & Kukulska-Hulme, 2008). While the possibilities of mobile devices are endless, there is arguably still a long way to go before their full potential is realised. They do, however, represent an important step towards a ubiquitous access to online information and, as such, condition a lot of the ways in which online education can be undertaken. The use of such devices is not about teachers or researchers trying to attract students into Web 2.0 environments from their mobile

devices, because most people can already see the benefits. This is a bottom-up revolution, where the students themselves are pushing their teachers, not the other way around. This change in habits reflects a basic human behaviour: if we are used to using a tool for some purpose, we will inevitably try to use it for others (Urh & Jereb, 2014). This means that, apart from the predisposition of students to use mobile phones and the intrinsic qualities of these devices for their education, it is up to second language teachers to extend their study time through relevant activities into their daily lives. While a lot of applied and practical applications of mobile technology for learning have been undertaken in an *ad hoc* manner, as Traxler (2007) notes, theoretical understanding of mobile learning together with methodologies intended to exploit the unique attributes of such learning have been largely lacking. A similar conclusion can be drawn from Hsu & Ching (2015), who note that over the last decade, research has focussed on projects that develop mobile learning experiences for different learner profiles, together with models and frameworks that subsequently can be used to explain them.

As mobile technology has become more pervasive, the pedagogic practices related to its use have arguably lagged behind. Pedagogic models have suffered from a lack of response to the fluidity and fragmentation of language in the digital era and from lack of a recognition that personal digital technologies are now deeply complicit in the transformation of language and its social and epistemological contexts. The argument for the paradigmatic crisis in mobile learning has already been made (Traxler, 2016) but centres around mobile learning's foundational axioms being situated in settings where mobile devices are scarce, fragile, expensive, where learning with mobiles is innovative and institutional (and the consequence of specific economic and political conditions) and where the research community's mind-set is a legacy or inheritance from 1990s e-learning.

It is argued here that mobile learning has now ironically become static in some parts of the world, stuck in institutions that are not moving forward, doing what it did ten years ago but to ever-smaller audiences, while in others it has yet to be really exploited fully. While mobile devices have a series of characteristics that promote activities, connectivity and access to online resources and people, all of which can be used for language learning, they are also limited by others, such as small screen sizes, battery life, on-screen keyboards that are difficult to operate, network access and velocity, etc., which prevent them from being a robust and reliable learning solution in and of themselves.

3. SOCIAL LEARNING

Social learning takes place through interaction between partners and may or may not lead to a change in the attitudes and / or behaviour of the subjects, but is generally considered to be intrinsically linked to the socioconstructivist paradigm of learning which, although it is a general or interdisciplinary concept, is ideal for subjects such as language and communication, whose enactment is eminently interpersonal.

In order to be considered social, an educational process must, first of all, demonstrate that there has been a change in the knowledge or understanding of the individuals involved and, secondly, that this change goes beyond the individual and his/her teacher or materials, and it is situated within broader social units or communities of practice through what are considered to be social relations, which are usually between personal or private and professional or occupational social spheres (Reed, Evely, Cundill, Fazey, Glass, Laing, Newig, Parrish, Prell, Raymond & Stringer, 2010).

Social learning historically connects with Computer Mediated Communication (or CMC; Turoff, 1991) of the 80s and 90s. In the same way that collaborative project initiatives among groups of native speakers of different languages have been praised unanimously, etc. (Thorne and Payne, 2005), there have also been criticisms related to the informality or lack of structure of the training process. This leads students to be less educated, humanist and critical in their thinking (Oppenheimer, 1997), in addition to, on some occasion, reaching erroneous conclusions. The connectivism of Siemens (2005) and Downes (2008) has advanced the social theory of learning in a way that is consistent with the reality of the 21st century, a digital reality whose differential factors with respect to the past are technology and networks. The role they play in human lives, and specifically in learning, has changed the nature of knowledge as something that enters the apprentice's human mind, accumulates and, in principle, remains, to reside in a changing diversity that requires the continuous (re-)creation and consolidation of multidirectional connections, human or not, to subsist and amplify.

Thus, formats of academic interaction common today in distance education include small working groups, closed communities (for example, virtual courses on institutional platforms) and open communities (for example, the platforms for collective awareness; Sestini, 2012). All of them have in common not only the human factor as a learning resource, but the need to have social technological tools. However, in a similar fashion to that noted for mobile learning, work in this area has been centred on designing student learning experiences and not on a theoretical understanding of how learning takes places, what is needed for it to happen, and why not all people learn in the same circumstances.

4. OPEN LEARNING

Open content calls to the inquisitive mind, leading naturally (in a similar fashion to sociality) to new learning applications, and hence open educational resources (OERs) and related practices have emerged. Open online education could not be based only on OERs but required OE processes as well. The combination of both elements laid the foundation for open online courses, which due to the lack of entry requirements and no cost, soon became what are currently called MOOCs (or Massive Open Online Courses). Hence, despite what some media outlets have seemed to transmit to society, MOOCs did not emerge spontaneously as an "educational revolution" but represent a natural evolution of OER. Downes (2012) would later argue that MOOCs' unprecedented didactic potential has allowed people to combine the advantages of open content with the concept of learning-training and personal-open development. This educational modality tries to promote learning for a large number of people with a shared interest, eliminating the initial barriers to access and assistance and, in some cases, offering certificates and/or credits at a very low cost at the end of the course.

However, such a complex learning modality could not exist without its limitations and problems, including the size of the student body, which hinders its management (for example, how to provide feedback and scaffolding), the problems of attribution of the authorship of the evaluation and the high degree of student dropout (Read & Barcena, 2014), among others. In addition, Barcena & Martín-Monje (2014) have discussed the specific difficulties of Language MOOCs (or LMOOCs), such as the changing role of teachers (where they go from being instructors to facilitators, so they cannot interact in a personalized way with the majority of registered students), the aforementioned problem of how to provide effective feedback with such an unbalanced teacher-student ratio, and the

difficulties of managing a highly heterogeneous group of students, composed of individuals with different learning goals, profiles and abilities and, specifically, different linguistic-communicative competences. Finally, authors like Romeo (2012) and Jackson (2013) also present fundamental criticisms with these courses, relating to the range and types of learning activities and interactions that are available, which determine the overall effectiveness of these courses.

It should be noted that, given that LMOOCs typically include an element of social learning, due to the very social nature of language learning and use (one thing easily gained with the large number of course participants), then some of the arguments presented in the previous section also apply here. While LMOOCs themselves can be argued to represent some progress toward a broader and more integrated learning paradigm, open learning can still be seen to struggle to break through to wider popular acceptance, despite continued official endorsement and in the face of the much stronger appeal of free systems, free software and free access.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Common to all of the three paradigms presented above is a failure to recognise that technology is no longer an inert add-on, comprised of dumb passive conduits and containers for language and learning. Rather, it is a part of a dynamic, where language, pedagogy and digital technology are intrinsic and pervasive elements of our societies.

The authors have argued that in order for mobile devices to reach their potential, rather than trying to develop pedagogy around their functional and structural characteristics, which is inevitably doomed to fail, such affordances should be subsumed into a larger and more complete paradigm.

It should provide a multidimensional framework, where their inherent drawbacks can be overcome by reframing them into a complementary technological, psycho-pedagogical and sociocultural nexus that integrates and scaffolds their use. Such a nexus requires other pedagogic structures as presented below. Social learning has been argued to arise naturally from social interaction. In fact, it is hard not to learn from such interaction. Furthermore, *sociality* has changed and *digitality* is now a major factor, mobility and connectedness being the determinants of social interaction, and not geographical proximity and traditional groupings. The emerging sociality of mobility and connectedness define language learning and, for this reason, mobile social language learning, and is argued here to be a fundamental part of the paradigm shift necessary for MOSLL. Finally, open learning is arguably stuck between flat unstructured participative web 2.0 ideologies and the hierarchic standards-driven web 1.0 institutions that try to promote it. The temptation might be to largely ignore open learning and centre the debate on a new learning paradigm solely on LMOOCs. However, doing so would ignore what OERs have to offer to language learning in themselves and also the wider implications of social learning and what such hybrid learning can offer when undertaken from mobile devices.

Our new paradigm, MOSLL, as a result of the arguments developed above, is based upon the following axiom, subject to improvement and revision: *In most societies today, characterised by permanent, ubiquitous and pervasive connectedness and mobility, language, pedagogy and digital technology are no longer separable or discrete; they are simply and merely manifestations and aspects of the ways things are now.* Furthermore, our new paradigm is not the vanishingly small intersection on yet another Venn diagram of modern digital learning, purporting to be the next framework or model. Our critique is based on the need to build a new form of learning, one

based on the changed epistemological foundations of society. These epistemological foundations actually vary from culture to culture, from country to country; each community has its own history of and trends for learning and knowing. Thus, the consequences of articulating this new paradigm should be the formulation of the associated research agenda, the scholarly community and the foundational texts that are part of it.

NOTES

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