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Privacy, power, place and identity – the construction of mixed spaces in an educational context

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Introduction

In this paper we report preliminary findings based on the use of social networking technologies within an educational context. In September 2007 approximately 180 first year students at Aalborg University were invited into the web environment 'Ekademia' (Ecademy) when starting their education within Human Centered Informatics. Ekademia is a social networking site built on the open source system Elgg (Elgg.org), and it contains features often characterised as social software or web 2.0 tools e.g. blogs, social networking, personal profiles, podcasting, widgets, RSS-integration, tagging and so forth.

Grounded in participant observations we analyse how the notion of mixed spaces can be understood as a hybridisation of offline and online contexts and how such different localities and places are woven into each other. Furthermore, we explore how blurry and dynamic boundaries between different spaces and discursive arenas, such as 'formal educational', 'informal socialising', 'semi-formal groups', 'project groups', are constructed and deconstructed. However, we also engage in a more critical enquiry in relation to the adoption of social software in educational contexts, by drawing on theoretical discussions which we relate to findings from the observations and results from a study made by (Clausen & Jacobsen, 2008).

We begin the paper by synthesising and discussing current ideas about web 2.0 tools and practices, as they have unfolded within educational contexts. Furthermore, we highlight some of the concerns, potentials and tensions that have been articulated in relation to educational uptake of social media. We then outline the educational intentions and design of Ekademia, which we analyse and discuss by drawing on the empirical data. We focus, in particular, on notions of identity, place, privacy, power and mixed spaces in an educational context. Furthermore, we discuss tensions that relate to pedagogical challenges in designing learning environments that draw on social technologies and practices which have their offspring in informal, rather than formal contexts, and were not intentionally designed for educational use. We conclude the paper by highlighting and discussing some of the concerns, challenges and potentials that arise from employing social technologies within educational contexts.

Education 2.0? – Something old, something new...

Within research on online learning and in educational contexts there has been a growing interest in exploring the potentials of social software, social media and web 2.0 technologies (Dalsgaard, 2006; Hewling, 2006; Jenkins *et al.*, 2006). Similar to general claims made in relation to web 2.0, educational practitioners have argued for the possibilities of more horizontalised patterns of communication and changed roles between consumers (students) and producers of knowledge (teachers). Hence, social software has been argued to (potentially) better support and enable more horizontal,

participatory, critical, student-centred and socio-constructivist designs for learning (Downes, 2005; Owen *et al.*, 2006).

Though, web 2.0 concepts, tools and practices are often portrayed as a qualitative break and paradigm shift, many of the ideals associated with current social technologies are not new. While the movement and rhetoric surrounding web 2.0, social media, social software etc. has gained huge attention and interest across various domains, it has also had its opponents framing web 2.0 as a meaningless buzz or business term. For instance, Tim Berners-Lee called it a 'piece of jargon nobody knows what means'. He argues that the terms often associated with web 2.0 e.g. participation, openness, conversation, community, connectedness, as highlighted by (Mayfield, 2007) are what the web was originally designed for¹. Likewise, the ideals are very similar to the first wave of thinking associated with Computer-Mediated Communication, where terms such as community, participation, openness and conversation were prevalent. Within an educational context, the research area of Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL) has from its outset been occupied with notions of peer-learning and collaborative learning (Koschmann, 1996) and has contributed with research on, and practical tools for, enhancing student-centred peer-learning and collaboration. Also, as noted by (Allen, 2004) the idea of computers supporting collaboration and communication has quite a long history.

Still, the force and speed with which the 2.0 thinking has spread across a number of only loosely related domains signals that there is, if not a qualitative break or paradigm shift, then at least a disturbance of regular ways of thinking about (and using) technologies for sharing, collaborating, learning and participating. Therefore, we do not mean to say that current social technologies and practices do not entail new possibilities for education or have a potential for initiating pedagogical changes. These ideas certainly have some merit, and the introduction of social technologies does hold interesting pedagogical potentials e.g. in terms of enhancing the focus on multiple overlapping networks of knowledge and identities (Ryberg & Larsen, 2008). However, pointing out reiterations of past discourses, practices and thinking can help us sharpen and highlight actual differences, developments and discontinuities.

In a recent article (Graham & Balachander, 2008) point to four features of a site that distinguishes it as a web 2.0 site: *1. Users as first class entities in the system, with prominent profile pages [...]* *2. The ability to form connections between users, via links to other users who are "friends," membership in "groups" of various kinds, and subscriptions or RSS feeds of "updates" from other users* *3. The ability to post content in many forms [...]* *4. [...]* *technical features, including a public API to allow third-party enhancements and "mash-ups," and embedding of various rich content types [...]* (Graham & Balachander, 2008, *What is Web 2.0? Section, para. 5*)

As the authors state, these points are not a check list, which univocally distinguish a so-called web 1.0 site from a web 2.0 site, but it seems to highlight and crystallise some central features of current social technologies. In the recent years we have witnessed the rise of social networking sites such as MySpace, LinkedIn and Facebook that have attracted a huge number of users. Likewise, services or social networks, such as del.icio.us, Youtube, Flickr or Citeulike, where people share bookmarks, references, videos, pictures, presentations or other kind of resources have become increasingly popular. These different kinds of social networks have been characterised by (Stutzman, 2007) as either ego-centric or object-centric networks. In the former the social network places the individual person as the core, whereas in the latter the core is a 'resource' or piece of content (such as a link or

¹ A transcription of an interview with Tim Berners-Lee is available from: <http://www-128.ibm.com/developerworks/podcast/dwi/cm-int082206.txt>

a video). The ego-centric social networking sites mainly revolve around networks consisting of a mixture of personal ties such as 'friends', 'acquaintances' or 'colleagues', and are predominantly focused on socializing/networking with one's existing network (and also expanding one's network) (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Larsen, 2005). The object-centric networks seem to revolve more around overlapping interests and affinities than personal or professional ties. However, while these distinctions are useful overarching categorical or heuristic devices, actual practice is more of a blurry continuum than a black and white distinction. Some users of Facebook may be heavily engaged in affinity or interest groups, rather than personal networks. Likewise services such as del.icio.us can serve as places for friend groups to share their bookmarks, rather than acting as a loosely coupled network for people with overlapping interest.

Personalisation and new social constellations

In a broader view current social technologies reflect an increased personalisation or individualisation, but also they seem to encompass new social constellations or aggregations, as pointed out by (Dron & Anderson, 2007). These are some of the key dimensions or driving forces in relation to the educational uptake of social technologies. The web-trends for one thing point to, reflect or amplify common sociological trends; namely that we are witnessing an increased individualisation and personalisation in the way we live and in the ways we (prod)use media, connect to others and various communities or affinity-groups. This is what (Castells, 2001) terms 'networked individualism' which refers to the trend that it is increasingly our individual preferences, affinities and orientations that shape our lives, rather than family traditions, cultural heritage or the geographically determined communities – an observation made by a number of other sociologists as well. Castells describes the Internet as the material support for networked individualism, and, in particular, mentions its support for 'me-centred' or 'personalised' online communities which span time and geographical borders, and are formed around personal preferences, values and affinities. While popular media readings of such trends often seem to understand 'me-centred' as 'self-centred' (or as indicating an unhealthy rise of narcissism), networked individualism is fundamentally a social pattern:

"Networked individualism is a social pattern, not a collection of isolated individuals. Rather, individuals build their networks, online and off-line, on the basis of their interest, values, affinities and projects." (Castells, 2001, p. 131)

While we are witnessing an intensified personalisation and individualisation we are simultaneously increasingly dependent on, connected to and mutually reliant on each other. Current social network technologies, whether object- or ego-centric, are prime examples of this. The core is the individual profile, but an individual profile, which features one's relations and outreach to the world, whether these relations are 'friends' or various 'resources' (e.g. music the owner listens to, favourite blogs, bookmarks, interesting news, or videos). In this sense 'the personal homepage', whether it takes the shape of a blog, a profile on social network site, a content sharing site or the like, has become increasingly personalised *and* simultaneously related to and populated by other's comments, greetings and resources. In this sense our individuality is carried out as fundamentally relational, networked performances dependent on others (Ryberg & Larsen, 2008).

The current social technologies have also resulted in changed social constellations or aggregations. For example (Dron & Anderson, 2007) point to three levels or types of social aggregations: The *group*, the *network* and the *collective*. The authors describe the group as:

"Groups are more or less tightly knit teams of individuals who are committed to each other and usually to a task or tasks. Often the group commits only for a period of time or to undertake a particular task. For example: relatives supporting an invalid, team members assigned to a project at work, or a class of students moving through a program of studies." (Dron & Anderson, 2007, p. 2461)

The *network*, in contrast entails more fleeting membership structures and boundaries; also networks do not necessarily revolve around a particular task or number of tasks:

“Networks connect distributed individuals. People may be connected to other people either directly or indirectly, but may not be immediately aware of all those who form part of the wider network. The shape of the network is emergent, not designed. Notable network behaviours include the groupings that emerge in syndicated blogs of the blogosphere, or through social networking software such as LinkedIn, Elgg or Facebook. Network members share a marginal sense of commitment to each other, but are typically induced to contribute to the network as a means to increase their personal reputation and to collectively create a resource that has greater value than individual or group contribution and perspective.” (Ibid)

Finally, the *collective* has an even looser and more emergent structure with no sense of ‘conscious’ membership or belonging:

“Collectives are aggregations, sets formed of the actions of individuals who primarily see themselves as neither a part of a group nor connected through a network. Like the Network, the shape of the collective is emergent, not designed. Notable collective behaviours include the formation of tag clouds, the ordering of results in Google, recommendations of collaborative filters or social navigation in various social systems based on prior use, evaluation or other stigmergic indicators.” (Dron & Anderson, 2007, p. 2462)

As mentioned, educational research within online learning has a long tradition of studying and designing for learning, in particular at the level of groups, whereas ideas of networks or collectives have not been explored to the same extent². While the area of CSCL has been occupied with notions of peer-learning and collaborative learning, some authors argue that CSCL research has had a tendency to focus on small, tightly-knit groups (a unit of analysis explicitly emphasised by e.g. (Stahl, 2006) in his theory of ‘group cognition’). As a supplement to this, it has been suggested by authors, particularly within the area of networked learning, that we need to expand our knowledge of ‘cognition’ and learning happening in larger-scale, loosely tied groups and networks with more ill-defined boundaries (Enriquez, 2008; Jones *et al.*, 2006; Jones *et al.*, 2008; Ryberg & Larsen, 2008).

These trends and ideas have led to an emerging re-conceptualisation of the role and form of online educational tools and systems. This is strongly pronounced in current trends of moving the focus from Virtual Learning Environments towards Personal Learning Environments (from VLEs to PLEs). The predominant trend within online learning technologies within the last ten years has been the gradual institutional adoption of and development of increasingly advanced Learning Management Systems (or VLEs) such as Blackboard, First Class, Moodle, Claroline, Atutor, WebCT etc. Roughly speaking the systems and/or the pedagogical enactments³ of the systems’ features can be described as having revolved around three overarching patterns of use: content delivery, communication or collaboration (Dirckinck-Holmfeld *et al.*, 2002). Some enactments of educational technologies have primarily focused on delivering content or making material available to students for self-study and with subsequent assessment through standardised quizzes/tests. In contrast other enactments have focused more on enabling and supporting asynchronous dialogues between learners or facilitating students’ group work and collaboration by making available a number of online tools (forums, file sharing, shared calendars, chats, and so on). Although LMSs/VLEs have been taken into use for different purposes and in a variety of ways, they often share the characteristic that they

² Here it should be mentioned that many study learning from a social network perspective. However, this is often a methodological approach to studying groups of learners, rather than with purpose of studying more loose constellations of people and resources in the sense of a network as proposed by (Dron & Anderson, 2007)

³ By using the term ‘enactments’ we wish to point to the fact that a particular design of a LMS/VLE affords and constrains certain types of use and may support some pedagogical models better than others. However, this does not uniformly determine the actual use of the system, as people can (and will) use the systems in other ways than the designers intended. Furthermore, LMSs/VLEs have increasingly become rather comprehensive systems or toolboxes with loads of features that can support multiple, very different pedagogical designs and patterns of use.

reflect an institutional, hierarchical perspective – both in their original design and in the particular enactments at various institutions. Usually this takes the form of courses, which are embedded in a hierarchical, organisational tree-structure e.g. university, faculty, school, programme, semester, and then a number of courses. In the particular courses there might be various materials, tasks, schedules, syllabi, activities, and tools for collaboration/communication. In LMSs/VLEs the core is most often a course or semester, rather than an individualised, personalised place. Thus, the logic and metaphor of such systems reflect an institutional, hierarchical perspective, which is very different from current social technologies' focus on personalised start pages and profiles. With inspiration from these technologies the role and form of online educational tools and systems is now being challenged and transformed by many researchers, practitioners and institutions, and there has been a growing interest in how to use web 2.0 tools and social network technologies in education e.g. under the headings of PLEs and virtual portfolios.

For example in the article “Social software: E-learning beyond learning management systems” (Dalsgaard, 2006) argues for an increased use of personal and collaborative tools owned and controlled by the students themselves. He suggests the following four points in order to support a student-centred approach to e-learning: *1. using a management system for administrative issues 2. offering students personal tools for construction, presentation, reflection, collaboration, etc. 3. facilitating networks between students within the same course, and 4. facilitating networks between students and other people working within the field.* (Dalsgaard, 2006, Towards a student-centred approach to e-learning, Section, para. 2). Dalsgaard (2006) also mentions different social aggregations, which are very similar to those pointed out by (Dron & Anderson, 2007) (Networks between people collaborating, networks between people sharing a particular context e.g. a course, and networks between people sharing a field of interest). Furthermore, he stresses the importance of a problem oriented approach supported by various personal and collaborative tools:

“Following this approach, an e-learning course is initiated by the formulation of problems for the students' self-governed work. [...] The learning processes do not take place within the management system, but develop through the self-governed work of students which is manifested in personal tools such as weblogs or wikis. Separate from the system, the student has different personal tools for construction, presentation, collaboration, etc.” (Dalsgaard, 2006, Towards a student-centred approach to e-learning, Section, para. 3)

Thus, very broadly speaking, the calls for PLEs and educational uptake of current social technologies seem to revolve around supporting increased personalisation of tools and the learning environment, while taking advantage of other social constellations than tightly knit groups, such as project groups or classes. Equally, many of the conceptual ideals associated with the web 2.0 movement⁴ such as: a bottom-up approach, user generated content, democratisation, collaboration, alternative copyrights (right to remix, reuse), user control etc. have re-vitalised and strengthened existing ideals within constructivist learning circles, because they resonate well with this tradition, as also expressed in (Dalsgaard, 2006; Downes, 2005). We shall return to these trends and ideas when outlining the rationale and design of Ekademia, as they also serve as a backdrop for understanding this particular enactment of social technologies within education.

While web 2.0 or social software terms and practices have become increasingly popular within technology enhanced learning, it is also becoming clearer that these practices entail some challenges to formal education, the institutional view of knowledge and the established use of technologies for learning (or rather teaching). As (Dohn, 2008) suggests, the view of knowledge and the practices of

⁴ Here, however, we do not mean to say that these ideals are necessarily carried out in practice, or that web 2.0 sites and services are democratic, egalitarian havens. For a more balanced and critical review of some of these web 2.0 discourses we refer to a recent special issue of First Monday (Zimmer, 2008)

web 2.0 can potentially clash with traditional or institutionalised conceptions of knowledge in terms of what constitute 'correct' or 'valid' student contributions. Likewise, (Bayne & Land, 2008) suggest that the textual and multimodal practices of web 2.0 often fit uncomfortably within the landscape of educational institutions. In educational practice such disturbances or potential conflicts are often seen from the viewpoint of the institution and concern the challenges of dealing with e.g. irrelevant or disruptive content. However, as argued in (Ryberg, 2008) we should equally analyse how institutional uptake of social software might affect students, and how identity, place, power and privacy issues are negotiated and perceived. How do the students perceive of the intersections (or possible conflicts) between e.g. formal and informal use? And how do they conceive of, or manage, issues revolving around power, place, privacy and identity (if at all). These are some of the issues we shall return to after outlining the design rationale behind Ekademia, but also we will point to institutional and organisational factors. For the time being it seems that many educational experiments with web 2.0 tools has been carried out as smaller-scale grass-root experiments in particular courses or as part of specific programmes. With some noticeable exceptions, there does not yet seem much experience with large-scale reorganisations of entire educational infrastructures or learning environments. In fact, it also seems that web 2.0 tools, services and practices are often construed as in opposition to institutional control and as threatening the 'walled gardens' of academia (or traditional business organisations). As (Jones, 2008) notes "*the university is portrayed as slow and cumbersome, whilst the new wave of technology is wild and spontaneous*", and he suggests that this might be a too simple view which can cloud our understanding of educational adoption of new technologies and the challenges associated with re-organising and rethinking institutional infrastructures. Therefore, we shall discuss the particular experiment with Ekademia from a broader institutional perspective, something which also questionnaire data and (Clausen & Jacobsen, 2008) seem to suggest the necessity of.

Ekademia – an online learning environment built on social technologies

In September 2007 when a new batch of undergraduate students began their education within humanistic informatics/human centered informatics they were at the same time met with two educational online environments – Quickplace (built on IBM Lotus QuickPlace, which is now called Lotus Quickr) and Ekademia. Quickplace is as an educational online environment for all students enrolled in the programme humanistic informatics/human centered informatics. It was taken into use as the educational and organisational technological infrastructure in 2001 after a period of smaller-scale experiments with various learning management and groupware systems (Tolsby *et al.*, 2002). The implementation of Quickplace was a small educational experiment within a larger regional project called The Digital North Denmark, which ran over 3 years with a funding of DKK 170 billion (granted by the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation). Since 2001 Quickplace has acted as the main technological infrastructure for Humanistic Informatics.

Quickplace follows in its design the logic and structure of the institution, and the various areas are segmented into semesters and course-pages, so that each semester has a similar design (but different courses, forums and schedules). In 2007 we wished to experiment with the Elgg software, as a supplement to Quickplace, since Elgg in its core design was built more on a social networking or e-portfolio metaphor. Furthermore, it contains features often characterised as social software or web 2.0 tools e.g. blogs, personal profiles, podcasting, widgets, RSS-integration, tagging etc. The aims were close to those also mentioned by Dalsgaard (2006): offer students tools for construction, presentation, reflection, collaboration. Facilitating networks between students within the same course, and facilitating networks between students and other people working within the field (Dalsgaard, 2006). One hope was that students would develop a stronger sense of a professional identity as a

student of humanistic informatics and students to a greater degree would inspire, share and exchange various material, resources and thoughts that might be interesting to the other students. Furthermore, there were some more specific goals connected to one particular course in philosophy of science, which we shall not touch upon in this article.

Below is a screen-shot from the page, which greets user after they have logged into the system:

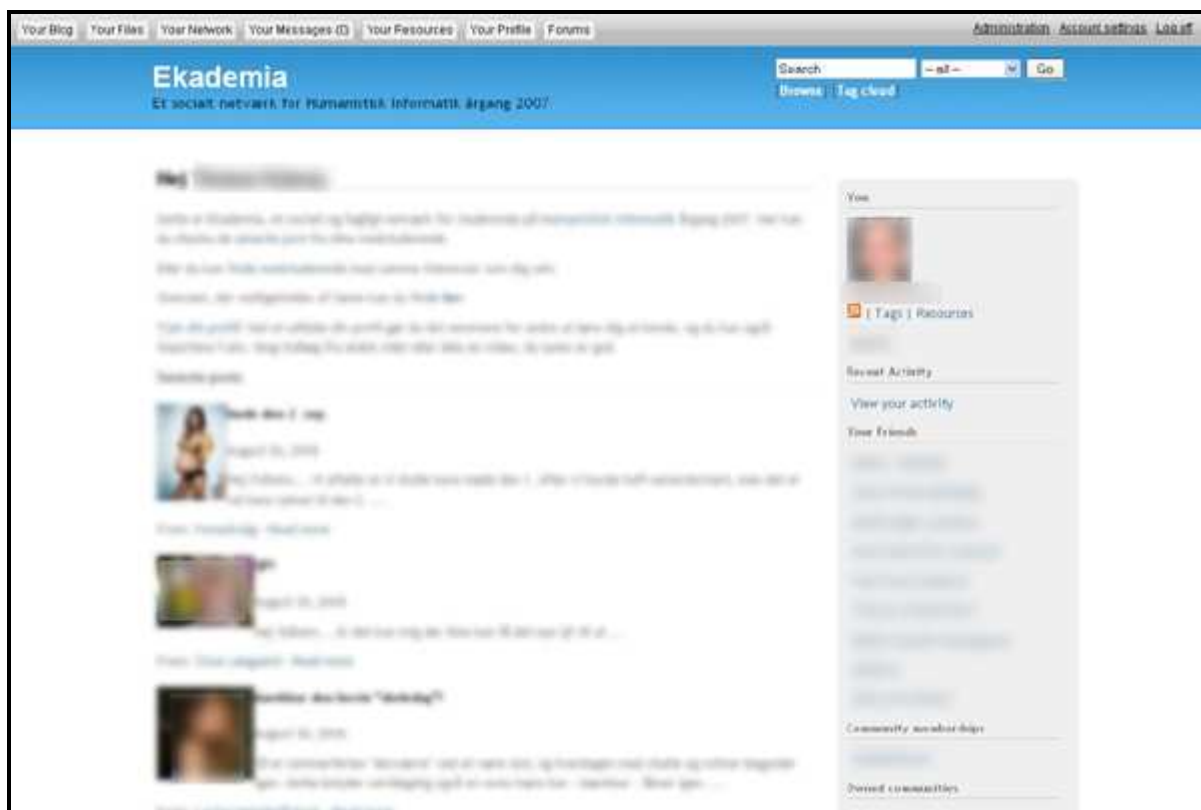


Figure 1: Front page of Ekademia after login

In the top-menu, there are quick-links for the main functionalities in Elgg. Each user has: a blog, a file-space, an overview of one's network and group memberships, a private message tool, a RSS aggregator (resources), a profile and access to a forum. On the left side of the front page is a small text with a few quick-links and then the ten latest blog-posts. On the right side is an overview of the user's activities (who have one connected to, written a message to, received a comment from etc.), a list of friends, list of community memberships and a list of communities one is a founder of.

All users can create new communities and keep them open, or based on approval by the founder. The latter, in particular, is used in relation to the students' project groups. This reflects the foundational pedagogy of Aalborg University, which is a PBL-approach often termed the Aalborg-model (Kolmos *et al.*, 2004) or problem-oriented project pedagogy (POPP) (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2002). This means that each semester is organized around approximately 50% course work and 50% project work. Early in the semester students brainstorm on a problem to work on for the entire semester (4-5 months) and form groups around these different problems or topics. The problems that they can choose to work on are only delineated by a broad thematic framework, which could be, for example, 'ICT as a medium'. From this initial problem formulation students work during the semester on defining, sharpening and addressing the problem they have chosen. The work occurs si-

multaneously with the regular courses that are organized to address the thematic framework from different angles and provide lectures and workshops. Students have also created a number of open groups e.g. a Macintosh community, a group for organising parties and so on. Groups work very similar to an individual's profile; a community has a group blog, a file space, resources and a community profile page. Thus, posting to a community is similar to posting a blog post in one's blog. Postings in groups can be set as open for everybody to see, or one can decide that only other members of the particular group should be able to view it. If a message is viewable by all users then it also appears on the front page, as one of the latest posts (actually this holds true for all post – one sees all messages that one is allowed to see on the front page).

When creating a profile, by filling out various information and keywords (tags), one can also create a number of widgets. For example one that imports external blog post or RSS-feed, shows recently logged-on friends, features a video or some that can contain embedded scripts or flash-programs. In relation to this it was an aim that students might slowly populate their profile with links, files and resources that might be of interest to other. For example importing latest blog-post from a blog on online communication, branding or whatever might be of interest.

In this sense, one of the aims was to support exchange and sharing across the three different levels of aggregation presented by (Dron & Anderson, 2007): the group, the network and the collective - and squarely placing the individual learner in the middle of those three by allowing them to create and maintain a personal presence. In contrast, Quickplace does not really feature something like a profile-page, own space and it does not support import of content, widgets or RSS-feed. Elgg (or Ekademia) on the other hand supports personalisation, as well as initiating multiple connections to people and resources across the three different layers of aggregation. While a community can be used for internal communication and collaboration for a *group* of students (e.g. a project group), it can equally act as a support for a *network* of students, as for instance the group for Macintosh users illustrates. The level of the *collective* is supported e.g. through being able to import and share book-marks, blog posting and videos etc. from external sources, but from the empirical data at hand there does not seem to have been a high-level of use of these features. Even though some students do link in their profile to their private blog, they do not import the post directly, though this is possible. Likewise, very few actually subscribe to RSS-feeds or import these into e.g. their profile (Clausen & Jacobsen, 2008). So, what is it actually used for then.

Communication and interaction on Ekademia

With basis in one year of participant observation and from the questionnaire created by (Clausen & Jacobsen, 2008) it seems evident that the students use Ekademia, in particular for their semester-projects where they work in groups. But secondly it is used for various, mostly, social purposes, involving e.g. invitations to parties or football matches. Such invitations are issued through using their individual blog and others see this as one of the recent messages on the front page. Often an invitation is followed up by a few comments which might for instance concern the more specific location of the party, football match or other event (concert or whatever), as many of the students are/were not familiar with the city of Aalborg. When students were asked about their conception of the roles of Ekademia and Quickplace respectively, the majority commented that they conceive Ekademia more as their own platform for group work and as a 'social platform', whereas Quickplace is the more formal place where teachers put up their material and course description – as can be read from some of their answers (Clausen & Jacobsen, 2008):

“It is a good alternative to QP. I think Ekademia is more user friendly for the students because they can create and administer their groups”

“The groups are gathered through Ekademia”.

“QP is the knowledge database for us, that is where we get our information. But it does happen that I look at Ekademia first. Ekademia is more of a social forum in my opinion.”

“We use it in the group to send material to each other and to read what the others have written. And then social activities with other students.”

While it is of course very positive that the students very much use the system for their group work, it came as somewhat of a surprise to us, that this was one of the main functions from the students' perspective. In a sense it is hardly surprising as the students work in groups every semester, but still it was somewhat surprising, as one of the aims with Ekademia was to actually enable more communication between groups and between all students on the particular semester, rather than supporting the more narrow and confined communication in groups (understood also as a particular level of social aggregation). At a certain point in time many of the project groups let their discussions be open to all other participants, which some did seem to do on purpose, whereas others might not have been fully comfortable with the access-settings for postings. Eventually, this practice has become more or less extinct, as a majority felt that the messages for group members should be confined to the group, to avoid clogging the ten most recent postings with messages that might only be relevant to a few.

While Ekademia is conceived of as a social forum, it seems also to be a particular social forum. As a community it is circumferenced by the shared membership or shared identity of being students at Humanistic Informatics. This also means that the blogs are not really used as blogs, but rather as a kind of message boards, and the postings refer to the particular social context of being a student at Humanistic Informatics. Apart from occasional posting where people share links to e.g. youtube video or a funny site, there are few postings which are not directly related to the social context of the semester. Furthermore, there are very few examples of what would communicatively be regarded as a traditional blog-post (e.g. a personal account, opinion, professional observation or other types of narratively structured and authored postings). Thus, the communication and interaction is primarily centred around the project groups, the various interest groups and occasional messages to all students on the particular semester (typically an announcement of an event or a question regarding e.g. an assignment).

In this way, Ekademia is a mixed space, which in a sense is personalised, but represents personalisation within a community one is connected to through one's choice of education. This also means that there are slightly different issues of power in place. While Ekademia is a place for the students it is also visited by faculty; and some lecturers for instance use the blog to share their thoughts or information about lecturers, theories or how to do group work and projects. In this sense Ekademia is not just a community for the students or populated only by students' comments and postings, which might also have an impact on what is shared and not. This is difficult to assess, as we have not interviewed students about this, and the particular question is not addressed in the questionnaire. However, it should be relatively fair to say that Ekademia constitutes a different context than e.g. a self-chosen network of friends on Facebook or Myspace. Here of course lies a certain conundrum, for as we imagine students to personalise their space, we also imagine them to do so as 'students' and within the context of an academic institution and network. We have not set up rules or communicated clear expectations on what would be appropriate or not to share, write or upload. However, we have not encountered any examples of use, we have considered problematic or worth discussing with the students. In fact most of the profiles are quite neutral, descriptive - though in kept in jesting tones and usually accompanied with funny pictures. While of course one concern within a university context might be whether students are behaving 'properly online' not uploading compromising

or inappropriate material. Another concern one might have, however, is how much we can and should expect students to put online about themselves. As earlier mentioned some students do maintain blogs, but seem to have chosen not to import them into Ekademia. While of course this could be because some of them do not know how to do so, another point might be that students feel this would constitute an unwanted conflation of different spheres or context. This, however, is something which we would need to explore much deeper through interviews with the students, as to be able to understand more about their feelings around privacy or what information they feel inclined to share, what they withhold or what they might share but feel slightly uncomfortable with. However, these are points we need to explore further, as obviously we should not in eagerness to use web 2.0 tools require students or ourselves to disclose information they or we are not comfortable sharing. Encouraging or requiring students to share bookmarks, clipping or whatever might intrude their private spaces or conflate spheres that they (or we) would prefer to be separate.

Discussion and perspectives

In many ways Ekademia is a mixed place. For one thing it features different kinds of groups and social levels of aggregation – from the tightly knitted groups to the more dispersed interest groups or the entire group of students at the particular semester; but also it represents a mix of social spheres of project groups, interest groups and the larger context of all students. As mentioned the far most used space for interaction seems to be the tightly knitted groups, rather than it seems to enabling a sense of a collective. This might also have something to do with the fact, that there have been no attempts at directly prescribing such a use of the system. For instance, one might initiate tasks or e-tivities (Salmon, 2002) as part of courses to enable such practices. This is also what is suggested by (Clausen & Jacobsen, 2008), but here we return to organisational questions of how to deal with such technological infrastructures as Ekademia.

While Quickplace was implemented as part of a larger project which came with a certain funding scheme and higher-level organisational attention, Ekademia has been a small scale grass root experiment driven mainly by interest and some people have taken up the use of the system as part of supervising students, or choosing to communicate with the students through the system. However, this is something which is completely voluntary, whereas there is a certain organisational expectation that lecturers use Quickplace for basic announcements and for uploading material to the students. This also means that it is very hard to initiate concerted pedagogical activities, such as various e-tivities, which might, however, alleviate the usefulness of some of the tools available. Expecting people to share ‘resources’ in general terms may have a significantly smaller impact than relating this to some more well-defined activities. At the level of a single course it might be easier to initiate, concert and sustain such activities, rather than expecting that useful collective-like structures might arise by themselves.

Also we need to remind ourselves of some of the concerns of mimicking practices emanating from other spheres. While it might be very tempting to assume that if social networking technologies work well in other contexts, so the popularity, ease-of-use and enthusiasm might rub off if the same practices are incorporated into the classroom. While there are indeed good reasons to work with such technologies in relation to educational purposes there are also a number of concerns that need to be explored further. We have mentioned the possible unwanted conflation of different spheres or contexts and the potential risk of compromising students’ sense of privacy and that these issues need to be explored more systematically, as educational institutions begin to incorporate social technologies that favour personalisation and connectedness.

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