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# Web 2.0 and learning: when the use of an informal context can bring help in a formal context

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## Abstract

The Web 2.0 follows the Web 1.0 in enhancing a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) through web applications available online. This research aims to analyze the informal learning contexts proposed by the web 2.0 like mutual websites explicitly linked to academic disciplines and curricula. To this purpose, data were collected from a natural situation: a French forum of mutual assistance available on the web. It was analyzed using conversational analysis literature (Marcoccia, 2004) and cognitive science (Pelissier, & Mailles-Viard Metz, 2010) in order to investigate how help (Puustinen and Rouet, 2009) is processed and how mutual assistance is constructed in an informal context linked to a institutional context.

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*Keywords:* Social Learning, Web 2.0 tools, forum, Formal and informal contexts

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## 1. Introduction

When learners cope with difficulties in their academic context, they may ask either their teacher, or their classmates, or a family member. With the development of the new technologies and more particularly, of the Web 2.0, unknown experts are also available online. The Web 2.0 follows the Web 1.0 in enhancing a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006) through web online applications. This participatory culture implies new skills in learning processes and provides also new resources and tools to interact (Ferguson, 2011). The technologies are more and more integrated in daily life; the subject appropriates the digital object that becomes an instrument (Rabardel & Béguin, 2005) for his/her activity. From theoretical considerations about the different contexts in the Web 2.0 and the concept of “help’s analysis, we try to characterize the help process using the web 2.0. To this end, we analyze forms of interaction with emerging technologies: a French forum of mutual assistance available on the web, “Literature studies”. This paper is based on an empirical and multidisciplinary approach of messages written on the forum by “help seekers”.

## 2. Theoretical framework

Web 2.0 is characterized by the following themes (Musser, J., O’Reilley, T. & O’Reilley 2007): 1) user participation 2) openness 3) network effects. Users are both readers and writers and the Web 2.0, more than the Web

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1.0, allows communication and collaboration. In literature subject, the use of Web 2.0 tools in and for education is usually examined and analyzed as “a means for adding real world relevance to in-class uses of internet-mediated communication tools” (Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008 p. 528), especially in foreign language learning researches and language acquisition. Whenever two contexts are compared: they are opposed to each other. The formal context is opposed to the informal context (Krashen, 1976) or they are compared; mediated and non-mediated contexts. (Sykes, Oskoz, & Thorne, 2008).

Few studies focus on the concept of “help” (help seeking and help giving) in ICT mediated environments. While Pelissier & Mailles-Viard Metz (2010) define help “as a “space of dialogue” and distinguish two participants in this space: “the “knower” and the “less knowing” one (Giasson, 1997)”, Puustinen & Rouet, (2009) refer to the help seeker domain’s research and list the three situations usually described: human helper and students using ICT, human expert communicating via learning technologies, help system.

They differentiate the information search and the help seeking: “there is always a human” (Puustinen & Rouet, 2009; p.6). We focalized the current research on the help seeking and more specifically on the help seeking from an unknown human, by analyzing mediated interactions between two users of the Web 2.0

Furthermore, in order to analyze distance learning situations, Pelissier & Mailles-Viard Metz (2010) characterize “the concept of help as (i) coming from a learning problem that teachers encounter (helps 3, 4 and 5) and/or which students (helps 1 and 2) have to cope with, (ii) appearing at a particular time (reactive and proactive help), (iii) linked to an intention (piloting, weaving and / or modulating) and (iiii) implementing a design process (content and form of teaching helps” (p. 3556).

### 3. Purpose of the research

This research aims to analyze the interactions between a student linked to a formal context and a human “knower” whom expertise is mediated by a Web 2.0 tool. The informal context is used as a complement to the formal context (Figure 1).

The student faces a problem, a difficulty or a question linked to a formal context (school, university), he/she may ask his/her teacher through a direct and/or a ICT mediated communication (email), he/she may also use a web 2.0 tool available online where he/she can seek help from an human “knower” which is unknown to him/her. The goal of the current study is to explore the interactions and web 2.0 mediated communications between the “knower” and the “less knowing” about a curricula subject. Are interactions and Web 2.0 mediated communications between them modified due to the digital web 2.0 tool used by the subject?

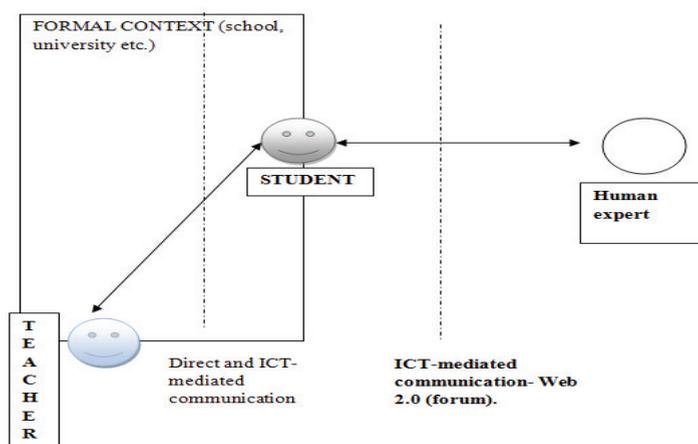


Figure 1: the informal context as a “complement” to the formal context.

## 4. Methods and hypotheses.

### 4.1. Data collection and problems

Data were collected from a natural situation: a French forum of mutual assistance available on the web. If the online forum tool is used for more than 10 years, we consider it as a Web 2.0 tool for two reasons: 1) the online forum exists via and for the participation of everyone; 2) the online forum is open to everyone (after registration). In a previous study (Duthoit et al., 2011), we conducted an empirical study of 76 messages posted on a French assistance forum during a one-month period (September 2010). Using the same data, we concentrated here our research to the “help seeking” process.

How to analyze an online forum? Marcochia (2004) using a conversational analysis approach highlights the specific features of a forum: 1) computer mediated communication, 2) asynchronicity, 3) public nature of the messages. Moreover, the forum has a specific participation framework: “Three kinds of participant roles: simple readers, casual senders, hosts; \_ Three levels in the production format: the transmitter (or animator) is the physical source of the message; the writer (or author) is the person who formulates the message; the enunciator (or principal) is the party to whose position the message attests. Several configurations of the production format corresponding to many different modes of participation (transmission, form, motive): the roles of animator, author, and enunciator of a message may be assumed by one or several participants; and besides, the authors of some messages are not identifiable” (Marcochia, 2004, p.29). We used the conversational analysis to approach the data in order to consider the forum’s users as only participants without giving them predetermined roles. Our purpose is to give another point of view to the dual approach of actors using learning system.

### 4.2. Hypotheses

H1. The online forum, as a web 2.0 tool (and inscribed in a participatory culture), provides to seekers, who could be beginners, a way to preserve their anonymity and their “face” (Goffman, 1959) in help seeking.

H2. The online forum’s specific framework provides to the seeker, who could be a beginner, a way to seek help from a “Community”.

## 5. Findings and Results

### 5.1. A “help seeking” addressed to an unspecified recipient.

In this forum, the first post of the thread or opening sequences is used for all the data analyzed as a request for help. In online forums, users cannot select a particular recipient unless they explicitly designed it. Each message starts with a “hello” (Bonjour) or “good evening” (Bonsoir) addressed to an undefined group. We believe that this specific framework is useful for the help seekers; they can ask multiple potential knowers without naming them.

### 5.2. The construction of the “help seeking’s messages.

The construction of the opening message is almost the same for each of the messages analyzed. It includes a salutation and is accompanied by a partial self presentation. Moreover, they only provide the elements necessary for the description of the problem before requesting help. The analysis of personal deictic shows that a specific “self presentation”: “I” is particularly used by the participant who is seeking help. It implies the use of “would” to give a conditional or potential “softening” to the demand. Subsequently, the description of the problem involves a field of references, including the use of a grammar terminology in the questions.

Posts initiatives are built using four parts: 1) Address (polite) 2) Presentation of the approach (which often includes a self presentation, 3) Statement of the problem via a direct or an indirect interrogative 4) Acknowledgements (Table 1).

English version.  
 F01:  
 Joined: 29/03/2010  
 Posts: 43  
 On: 30/08/2010  
 At 21:44

Good evening (1)  
 I started Latin this year (2) and I need an explanation about a difficulty [...] I ask myself from which declensions is genus, generis.  
 I would opt for the third declension (and themes in i-consonant; model corpus, corporis), but while seeking an answer on the internet, I found out that it could be the fourth declension (u-themes, as stated in the book). Could someone explain clearly my mistake? (3)  
 Thanks in advance (4)

Figure 2: Example of findings in the chosen forum.

### 5.3. Anonymity or less knowing role?

In addition to messages, each participant owns a profile in the forum. This profile shows as well as data given by the participant (pseudonym, localization) but also data that are automatically given by the forum's proprieties; as the number of posted messages.

Each user of the forum uses a pseudonym. Only two of the participants claim an identity close to their real identity (SurnameRegion or NameSurname). It appears that these participants are very active on the forum (more than 1000 messages when we analyzed the forum). Moreover, we previously showed that these two participants give a talk especially on the reply position (Duthoit et al., 2011), which reminded us the Wikipedia configuration (Levrel, 2006).

Out of the 76 analyzed messages, each help asking message is provided by a "non active" participant of the forum (less than 10 messages on the profile). Furthermore, it seems that the forum is a way to hide his/face from the institutional context as each message is linked to an institutional context (as school, university etc.). Remember that the forum's topic is about a curricula's subject. Asking an unknown and online Community; a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998) appears as a strategy to get answers.

## 6. Conclusion

Analysis showed that the structural characteristics of the web 2.0 tool (forum) facilitate the learner in his help's seeking: anonymity as a face protector and openness as potentially provider of many replies. However, this study cannot be generalized, it is a qualitative study. These hypotheses should be tested on other corpus. Moreover, we are concerned about the efficiency of these informal contexts: learning process could be fostered by this kind of informal social networks.

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