

5th World Conference on Educational Sciences - WCES 2013

Educational digital stories in 140 characters: towards a typology of micro-blog storytelling in academic courses

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Abstract

This paper explores ways of integrating digital storytelling in university courses through one of the most popular social media application: microblogging. More specifically, the authors investigated the way stories in 140 characters associate with social networking facilities of this technology in terms of opportunities, challenges, advantages, limits and risks. The practical part of this article focuses on a typology of ministories when using microblogging as a social technology for students' e-portfolios as final assesments. Thus we have developed and applied a set of digital storytelling activities for students enrolled in ten courses, hosted on two educational microblogging platforms – Edmodo and Cirip.

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Selection and/or peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Education and Research Center.

Keywords: microblogging, higher education, digital storytelling, e-portofolio, social networking;

1. Introduction

In education the convergence of different types of social-presence technology (with microblogging in the top) became the link between teachers and students and also the direct contact with the world of educational actors or the needed experts. However, 'in academic life, microblogging is about the idea of continuous information on what you do, discover and experience', which in terms of devices and technology, and also in terms of learning mobility and participants in this process, define microblogging as a new form of mobile and social learning.

2. Microblogging as social technology of / for study

For students participating in courses held on the educational platforms Cirip.eu and Edmodo in the last three years by the authors, microblogging proved to be a catalyst of social practices (Grosseck, Holotescu and Patrut, 2013). Thus, these environments act like a new form of expression and social interactions, like minimalist tools capable of orchestrating complex social relationships that cannot be found in traditional social networks (compared to Facebook, for instance). However, microblogging is perceived by students with good digital skills as an almost

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virgin media territory, which they can freely explore. Consequently, we are talking about collective consciousness and ambient intimacy, about a space meant to host feelings that people cannot otherwise express publicly.

Any of the following advantages can justify the importance of ensuring a digital social life on a microblogging platform from the perspective of a social network used in academic courses:

- The capacity to create and develop a social network until reaching a critical mass of the public interested in social interactions (colleagues, professionals, specialists, librarians, policy makers, social entrepreneurs and other educational actors).
- The feeling of networking seen from the perspective of one's adherence to the stream (one is part of the community and identifies oneself with it), influence (one has influence over the community and the other way around), integration and meeting the necessities (one enjoys the others' support and one offers support in return) and sharing feelings (the connections between community members).
- Redefining communication and social interactions. The virtual space has promoted the transformation of traditional human relationships based on proximity and groups from the same communities to communities centred around virtual social networks that are scattered from a geographical point of view. Thus, it is not surprising that they mostly refer to the online migration of a consistent part of one's personal, social and professional life, in microblogging being more easy and fast.
- The individual's freedom of movement. Users are practically free to negotiate their presence within a certain group, which they can willingly follow or not. Even though this aspect may seem to be insignificant, it is not present when we refer to groups and communities in day-to-day life. Moreover, actual adherence to a microblogging platform has brought along two side effects: differentiating one's own network from others networks and the positive credit given to it.
- Socialising naturally. Virtual social networks offer one the possibility to have an online presence, to meet new people with the same interests and hobbies, to expand day-to-day online interests. In microblogging environment all is accomplished in a casual, natural, simple manner, devoid of artificial behavioural actions.
- The network effect is the phenomenon through which a service gains more value as more people use it. The members of your network (F/F circle) must work together to increase the 'network effect', i.e. to perform those activities that can create a synergy and help avoid the doubling of the effort within the network. Furthermore, the mutual trust and responsibility which every user contributes will encourage the information flow and synergy within the network, generating power and intelligence.
- Creating a personal learning network. Within a social network, learning can also occur by creating and forming connexions with other people and informational resources with the declared purpose of enriching the members' capacity to understand themselves, others, the effects of their behaviour on other people, group processes, etc. Such a network is founded on interpersonal relationships characterised by a deep and highly expressive personal involvement. Thus the idea of 'shared knowledge' is embraced, meaning that the things we know are incorporated in a personal network of connections that we form when we are in contact with others, with information resources and with the world.
- Member filtering. Once the profile has been created, users can communicate with any other person or with those members who accept communications from (un)known persons, according to the site operating rules.
- Communication is interactive, varied and easy due to a sum of new technologies meant to increase connectivity and diversity of the applications within social networks. As a matter of fact, communication relationships on a microblogging platform have a degree of laterality that is quite high.
- Microblogging is in a state of permanent change, both in terms of technology or software used, as well as in terms of direct manifestations (an aspect that confers them new features periodically, from the interface to applications, which are either kept or not, depending on users' reaction).
- Connecting to the community's requests. There are social groups that provide opportunities for increasing adult participation in social campaigns, by means of user-generated content and the specific niche of comments and the online exchange of views regarding various issues.
- Participation (investment of time, actions and effort in network activities). Twitter for e.g. is known for the fact that it serves millions of enthusiasts and people who want to make new acquaintances. Although the key

element is trust, which derives from the respect invested in the chosen community, in the microblogging space, the same importance must be given to the following: *permeability* (the extent to which it allows or not for new members to be added – F/F ratio); *flexibility* (the degree of informality and freedom), as well as *intimacy* (the degree of the members' mutual closeness).

- The temporal dimension, as a key value of the 21st century, is an omnipresent notion in our digital numerical lives. Time offers a competitive advantage in comparison to other services and thus becomes a very important aspect, especially in the case of social presence services such as Twitter. The temporal dimension that is, to a certain extent, also applicable to services used to keep records of daily activities - lifelog (like Life2Front) or to create collaborative chronologies (such as xTimeLine), is estimated to become a powerful differentiating criterion for online content editors, which will play a central role in social applications.
- Microblogs can provide a powerful environment in order to improve the way in which certain cultural and social aspects are perceived. For instance, a critical culture and social relationships in the network make cultural acts be much more transparent and malleable.

Taking into account our own observations/experiences and compiling information from literature, the authors have identified several (potential) issues/limits/disadvantages faced by microblogs as social networks in education:

- Currently, social networks do not grant people enough freedom to build and create their own worlds, which is exactly what users want to do.
- Microblogging entails the acceptance of a sociological fragmentation of their members in order to classify and coordinate them within certain types of activities that require a common interest, within certain areas of mutual correspondence and sometimes even according to age or gender categories.
- Permanent expansion may lead to the loss of a main topic, which might subsequently cause a loss in the number of users.
- Exclusivity. Microblogging is not exactly permissive (the case of academic/scientific/research platforms).
- Inequality of participation. At the basis of this phenomenon lies the reality of the passive participation of the greatest part of microbloggers. Thus, although the basic ingredient of a social network is interaction, a significant number of users prefer to explore and experiment with the network individually instead of becoming directly involved in one community or another.
- A direct consequence is micro-networkitis, the fatigue caused by being present and follow too many users on a microblogging platform.
- Anonymity. Through the millions of users that they have worldwide, microblogging platforms can potentially connect a vast, almost limitless world of people and resources. Generally, a user's profile comprises a series of information published by the person, in addition to feedback received from other users, which can be quantified in various ways according to the specific features of the network. What matters is the qualitative approach of these identities.
- On the other hand, when the microblogging is used excessively, there is a tendency that can be defined as a certain feeling of irritation and/or aggression exhibited by some users.
- Disclosing personal information such as one's short bio (name, qualifications, interests, hobbies, possibly photographs or the refusal to disclose such data) may deny one access to communication/collaboration.
- Manipulation, extortion. Within microblogging, certain people will always stand out from the great mass of users: public personas, celebrities, leaders of political parties, etc. They can direct users towards certain goals. When improperly used, microblogs become powerful instruments for generating social changes (see the recent political movements from Moldova, Iran, Egypt or London riots).
- Pretexts for personal exposure. As useful instruments for testing human shallowness, microblogs help feed dreams and give the impression that the big world is actually much smaller. Moreover, because microblogging focus on creating social interactions with other people, social inclusion (membership to a group/community), on the need to pay and receive attention, negative feedback may cause people to become uninhibited or become engaged in lewd or inadequate behaviour.
- Access with harmful intentions. Microblogging policies on comments are generally quite open and permissive. More often than not, divergent opinions, even if critical, lead to constructive discussions.

- Viral contamination: members of networking sites often receive invitations to follow accounts with which they have nothing in common.
- Social spam (unsolicited messages from members of the network).

And, last but not least, a certain hostility when it comes to introducing social networks into various organisations, manifested especially among educational institutions. The consequences of such a refusal become irrelevant, however, given that 1 out of 3 students is using this type of socialisation in order to communicate and share knowledge. Other unforeseeable negative human consequences that may occur are: *social corrosion* (due to the 'invasion' of social interaction sites in digital life, the 'weakening' of connections might determine their vulnerability); *social isolation or absenteeism* and *social autism* (it is easy to ignore anyone); certain *social allergies* as reactions to rude or reckless behaviour of 'friends' (which may become more severe through repeated exposure).

3. Typology of mini-stories based on social activities

In this context, the idea that microblogging can be used as a form/an extension of real-time blogging for telling stories on a smaller scale, which creates an interaction between users by means of various devices, technologies and applications, makes the topic itself challenging. Thus, we paid a particular attention to storytelling in 140 characters (*mini-stories*). As literature revealed, digital storytelling is defined as telling stories and sharing information with multimedia tools and resources (Yuksel et al., 2011). It means recounting (using more or less details) their own actions or their colleagues', teacher' actions and/or educational activities, interactions developed within the group or other events that students take part in (such as conferences or other scientific events) and conveying the information in a casual manner during the class.

Conveying information through stories in short messages is a very good method, because information is stored in the students' memory for a longer period of time this way, as compared to information occurring in another context (moreover, it becomes possible for them to learn by following an event). Stories improve organisational learning (the university as an organisation), highlight common values and sets of rules; they represent an excellent means of capturing, encrypting and transmitting tacit, high-value knowledge, while also playing an excellent role in knowledge sharing and organisational change.

The activities presented next serve the very purpose of developing social skills using a microblogging platform as a social network environment, by preparing students for a better interaction with their peers and the world, especially in order to provide easy access on the future labour market (students are also encouraged to propose their own topic, using web 2.0 tools/social media):

- *Week-end thoughts* – write a statement / message (with a specific hashtag on a specific topic).
- *Who am I?* ('Explain yourself' in 140 characters or through a CC image, audio/video clip etc.).
- *Who are you?* What makes you special? (create a self story with a tool like photopeach, prezi, glogster etc.).
- *What book I read* / Book on the nightstand / Book of your Childhood.
- *Me in Music* / What am I listen to (use blip.fm to post your favorite songs or artists).
- *The Fair of (famous) quotes* / sayings / reflections.
- *Celebrating together* Spring, Autumn, Christmas, Eastern, The End of Year etc. (for eg. My Christmas tree – include in the message pictures, video clips, presentations with our own / our towns' Christmas trees).
- *A haiku a day* (keeps low grades away ☺).
- *Travelling through time* – imagine (your) life on a particular period of time (using an animation web 2.0 software / one can develop further using a mobile phone and augmented reality).
- *Text me* (using mobile phone to post on microblog answers to polls, photos or mini-videos capturing students everyday life-facts – lifestreaming with qik, poll with polleverywhere or wiffiti, fun with qr codes apps etc.).
- *Motivational poster*. We proposed a combination word - picture (Creative Commons) to be associated with microblogs and / or microblogging and posted on the flow.
- *Be an online archeologist! Curate the web* - a collaborative collection of resources using particular hashtags, enlarged and used after the courses end.

- *Translation of videos* (posted for e.g. on dotsub.com, where the transcript can be translated collecting the translated phrases tweeted by students).
- *Visual Statements / Internet Meme* using notes on a Flickr image. Starting from a tag cloud application like wordle.net, a tagcloud with the words that appeared most frequently in tweets during the course.
- Participate with students at local event (tweetmeme) or scientific events (microreading the stream).

The aim of each activity is to develop creative thinking, team work, social skills, communication skills and to promote interaction. Thus a possible *typology of micro-blog storytelling* in academic courses can be seen as:

- *Personal Discovery Stories* – tell how you discovered a lesson / a term / a theory.
- *Success or Failure Stories* – tell how you achieved (or not) something.
- *Biographies or Autobiographies* - tell a story about yourself or another person (researcher, notable character of the area of specialization) from start to finish.
- *Picture Stories* – tell a story in five images related with a subject from the curriculum / to develop reflective learning.
- *Collective stories*, Imagine If ... stories, Fiction (Time travellers), etc.

4. Final thoughts ...

For the time being, microblogging is a source of intellectual optimism, a fact of life, which will increasingly become a fact of learning at all ages and levels of education. Thus, the current debates on whether or not to introduce microblogging as a social technology into (higher) education are useful but ultimately worthless without experience, creativity and innovation – the desire to think of the educational process in completely new terms. We also hope that the present paper represents an invitation to future reflections and studies for reviewing, expanding and validating the theoretical basis of using microblogging for telling stories by all educational actors.

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