Social Media in Classroom Teaching. How Teachers Can Exploit the Added Pedagogical Value of Social Media for Language Teaching Purposes

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Abstract

The use of social media for learning in schools is becoming more and more widespread and reflected in the European context. But existing studies and learning material repositories predominantly consider social media as a new technology. They are regarded as a technology enabling users to easily get in contact with other people. This paper puts social media in another context - they are regarded as a "social" innovation rather than a technological one. We see the innovative core of social media in the generation of content by users. This "user generated content" paradigm has started and will continue to change the way people communicate, work and learn.

The paper narrates the experience gained in the ongoing EU funded Comenius project "Learn to Teach by social web" (L2T) which is exploiting the educational potential given by social media in the educational field. In doing so, we concretize the discourse around social media for the classroom by investigating the potential of social media in new teaching methods and in learning outcomes.

The project involves teachers and students from six European countries. It is the aim of the project to develop a curriculum that teachers who never used social media in classroom teaching before can now prepare themselves for using social media in their classroom teaching. The curriculum is working with examples and best practice in order to illustrate hands-on social media use. Language teaching is a very important example, as social media require - and produce - a very specific use of language. This is reflected in the curriculum.

This curriculum is developed by teachers (half of them language teachers) from six countries in a user generated content process, facilitated by the University of Dortmund, Germany. The first results highlight how social media foster student driven learning and empower teachers to use social media supported learning in classroom teaching. The proposal constitutes a repository of practical experience and a place of confrontation between teachers from different educational and technological backgrounds. Language learning is facilitated in a shared project of students from all participating schools.

The approach of the project is to help and motivate teachers in their educational activities by stimulating their interest in new pedagogic approaches, especially "learning by teaching". The L2T project is developing and strengthening communication between teachers and students and putting into practice the ideas behind the constructivist approach of teaching with social media (action learning, active learning, learner-to-learner interaction, learning by teaching, exploring learning).

The teachers themselves see the project as a source of "inspiration", a tool "made by teachers for teachers", a space capable of strengthening "the international community of practice of teachers", and a platform where they can experiment, get involved and share ideas.

1. Social media as a social innovation. Changing the paradigm.

Whilst e-mails are addressing specific receivers and a static websites only works if someone visits it (you have to "pull" the content - meaning that you have to be active to see the content, while "push" content is popping to your attention), most social media websites are connecting people with people and are "pushing" content to people (they are delivering news to your e-mail account or to your facebook chat, for example). You can name it a shift from "push media" to "pull media" or you can call it the connection of people with people.

We understand social media as internet applications that foster the production of "user-generated content". This definition regards the social media more as a "social innovation" than a technological one. The social innovation – in the understanding of Howaldt/Schwarz [1] – is seen in the support of user generated content – as a paradigm that refers to the sociological layer of this innovation. Seen from this viewpoint, social media can change the way people in the knowledge society communicate, work and learn.

Social media have dramatically changed the way that IT professionals are working [2]. But in the same way that IT professionals or journalists are implementing other people's ideas in their work, most employees will do so in close future. Future working life will be influenced by online cooperation of people via social media. The "content production process" will be more and more a co-creation process of people with different background, working together on one topic. This is demanding for skills such as facilitation abilities, tolerance and communication competences.

From a teaching point of view, social media have two intersections with classroom teaching: Firstly, social media are offering an added pedagogical value. This should be exploited for teaching purposes. In language teaching, the paradigm of learner centered learning is well addressed by the possibility of social media to support individual learning on individual learning pathways. Secondly, social media are re-shaping the world of labour, education and communication. Today's students will be inflicted by social media within their grown up life. Students are mostly fit to technically use social media – mostly even better than their parents and teachers. But as we regard social media a social innovation and a change of the world of labour, it is becoming obvious that they demand more than just handling. From our point of view social media are demanding specific social competences in order to use them reflected, appropriate and safe as means of work, communication and participation.

Concerning the language learning, social media have an important role for the development of a new ways of understanding, translating and visualizing languages. The possibility to create a concrete link between the learning objects and real life can motivate and sustain students in language learning, allowing them to "live" the language, as part of their everyday life and of a community that is increasingly global. As another example, social media foster the cooperation of students from different countries, as they allow group building, short notice communication and the sharing of different media items.

2. The L2T project: social innovation in practice

The basic idea of the EU LLP Comenius funded project "Learn to teach by social web" (L2T) (www.learn2teach.eu) is to inspire teachers that have never used social media before to implement social media in their classroom teaching. Our initial research showed that the use of social media is well spread among some groups of teachers. An online survey of 254 teachers in six European countries showed that 60% of the participating teachers are using youtube videos, 28% cloud applications and 24% wikis. But these figures have to be seen in an analytical light: These teachers present a digital avant-garde, because they were recruited through an online survey and "offline teachers" were not included. On the other side, our survey showed a significant number of teachers that are not using social media and a wide spread of reasons for not doing so. As a crucial barrier for a wider use of social media in classroom teaching, our survey identified a lack of competences and self confidence in social media usage. Missing or poor ICT equipment or strict school policy on social media use were not seen as major barriers for social media use in the classroom.

On the base of these findings, the project is aiming to provide a training material that is filling this gap: It offers a very easy to use, very "hands on" training curriculum for teachers who have never used social media before and do not feel confident to use social media. Therefore, the curriculum should work with examples, easy to follow step by step guidance and pedagogical inspirations. The curriculum should be worked through in a one week holiday period.

There are several handbooks and banks of resources available on this topic for teachers, but they all address teachers with an interest in ICT based teaching and imply a certain level of ICT competence. The L2T curriculum is explicitly addressing teachers that have not thought about social media as something bigger than just a technological innovation and therefore starts with setting social media in the light of a social innovation. At the same time, the curriculum is assuring a good target group approach by asking active teachers from very different school subjects and very different ICT level to actually write the curriculum. Under the idea of "from teacher for teachers" we have assembled very specific classroom knowledge of social media. The curriculum does not tackle issues like setting up software, but relates to other resources for these issues. The curriculum concentrates on pedagogical aspects and demonstrates how social media based classroom teaching can be or has actually been done by teachers who are not very confident in ICT usage.

3. Lessons learnt (…so far)

The L2T project is seeking to systematically increase teachers' awareness of social media tools with the support of a self-study and tutored curriculum. Teachers experience that first-hand how social media can combine "fun" and a "contemporary way of living" with new collaborative learning

opportunities. One of the key didactic arguments is the "inspiration" concept: The curriculum is designed in a way to foster co-construction, discussion and experimentation; the acquisition of new technical and didactical tools; the renewed motivation due to sharing, which is a great source of inspiration for teachers. Another inspiring element is the way in which this project is helping to change perspectives in learning: A classroom in which learners and a teacher discuss and share the construction of meaning is characterized by new roles and attitudes: The teacher is step by step becoming a learning guide, or a facilitator for self-organized learning. Of course, it should not be forgotten that facilitating processes of self-awareness and self-orientation for an active way of learning require new competences.

It means stimulating the students in their capabilities of choice and guides them in a balanced access to experiences that include social media and are more and more developed in them. We can use the old words "from the sage on the stage to the guide at the side" to describe this change of viewpoint. This does not mean that the teacher looses his/her role of expert, but he/she is now supposed to lead the students through their own experiences in self-orientation, allowing students to become "expert learners". Social media can be interpreted as an easy to handle environment that fosters user empowerment. But as any environment, it still needs a guide to actually facilitate the acquisition of new competences. Thus, social media as an environment and a teacher as a guide have to be adjusted to each other's competences and strengths. The perspective of seeing social media as a social innovation rather than a technical one and the link to a changing world of labour can function as a compass for teachers now starting to discover social media.

Following the constructivism paradigm [3], the project is stimulating teacher to view the classroom as place of learning in which knowledge is not only transmitted (from a full box to an empty one), but has to be co-constructed ad re-constructed through sensemaking [4] and through an enhancement of both cognitive and experiential knowledge and connections. Social media, mostly in language learning, are changing the way to communicate: participation, action and interaction are more and more key part of live (even to the extreme, such as the difficulty to detach ourselves from new media) and contribute to a continuous thinking and reframing around learning and identity [5]. Teachers and students together can create these reflective spaces in classrooms thanks to social media. In this sense, the process is both positive and appreciative [6]: It permits to create a conversation and a space in which students and teacher act and reflect starting from their strengths and values and enhance the strengths and values of others, in a spiral of positive learning.

Furthermore, the project shows which aspects of learning with social media require special attention. First, the different technical skills in ICT use have to be taken into account: Even if new ICT tools are becoming more and more widespread in our everyday activities, this does not mean that each and every teacher has already developed the necessary competences for using those in the classroom. Social media use in the classroom is demanding an IT help desk to provide teachers with low ICT with confidence.

The project underlines the necessity to sustain teacher in change processes: They need the help of facilitators and experts not only to access social media, but above all to keep the process of co-construction and interaction alive during the time. It is necessary that this process is general and involves the different countries community in a global movement of increasing awareness and even promotion of this new way of learning, overcoming the lack of resources and the different contexts situations.

The project is contributing to create a community of practice of teachers and learners from different European countries strengthening sharing and co-production processes. These occasions of cooperation have to go beyond the school boundaries and the national didactical programs, to allow that stories and practices become an "inspiration" flavor for teachers.

The project has started in 11/2012 and is running till 10/214. At the moment the consortium is starting pilot testing of the curriculum, which will be available in 2014.

References

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