Chapter 101

Competences and Learning Profiles of Digital Age's Students

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ABSTRACT

In the connected world we live in today, people no longer look for information only in formal places. Internet has become a place of choice to gather information. Social networks have grown from places for socialization to platforms where knowledge is created and shared, where connectivity and collaboration are natural. Many people look at the web as a place for learning, using it to create a network which allows them to gather, select, share, reshape ideas and create knowledge to then replicate on social networks. Students' learning profile is becoming more proactive in the search for information and constructing valid knowledge. The demands of the information age raise the necessity of students to acquire different skills and competences – 21st century skills. This chapter aims to present the different students' learning profiles and the type of learning environments available online.

INTRODUCTION

Today's society is considered to be digital, due to the proliferation of computer and communication technology. Computers, cell phones and Internet have become more accessible for personal use, and a requirement of the workplace. Castells (2005) states: "the network society is not the emerging social structure of the Information Age: it already configures the nucleus of our societies". In the past few years academic researchers developed various studies that show "the commonality of this nucleus across cultures, as well as the cultural and institutional differences of the network society in various contexts."

Students learning processes and profiles have changed with digital technology, no longer relying only in formal learning contexts for acquiring knowledge, they became more proactive in their search for information and turn to the contents they can find in the Internet. The search for online courses has grown and it's not showing signs of stopping, *more than one in four education students now take at least one course online* (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Students are in a continuous process of learning, through their personal networks and connections they update throughout their lives. Learning is no longer formal, it is informal, non-formal and natural. It occurs in several and different contexts.

Social and collaborative web are making changes in the way students learn, especially in a distance learning format. Students use simultaneously diverse types of media in their daily lives, therefore to them traditional teaching is poorly stimulating. Education is in need of change, becoming more personalized, reflexive, social connected, involving and permitting instant gratification to embrace both *native and digital immigrants* (Prensky, 2001).

Social Web, virtual environments and Web 2.0 tools, by nature, are spaces that allow a closer contact between users, enhancing cooperation, collaboration and socialization among them. Students daily use it, but to actually learn and retain knowledge available on the web there is the need of acquire digital skills (e-skills), social (soft) skills and be digitally literate.

This chapter aims to know if and how these competences and access to digital and virtual tools are changing students learning processes and profiles, and how the learning that occurs in VLE (Virtual Learning Environments) and PLE (Personal Learning Environments) are allowing them to be more participative in constructing their knowledge. To achieve this goal a literature review will be presented along with examples about the different students' profiles, the different forms of learning, of personal and virtual learning networks and connectivism and how these impact e-learning contexts.

BACKGROUND

Students need to acquire certain skills and competences, specific of a digital and connected society in order to *effectively benefit from e-government, e-learning and e-health services, and participate actively in the knowledge society as co-creators, and not simply consumers, as highlighted by the European e-skills strategy* (McCormack, 2010). To only possess hard skills (that comes with experience and formal education) may not be enough to get a job. Besides e-skills and e-literacy competences, soft and social skills are also a demand. These skills and competences can be practiced and enhanced in virtual environments - which are by nature social and collaborative spaces. Students have access to virtual worlds with role-play and simulations, social networks and a wide range of web 2.0 tools, which allow them to practice and develop some of these skills and competences. In an e-learning format, which normally means to study at a distance of 'brick and mortar' tertiary institutions, e-skills are a demand. And in spite of what one might think, to learn at a distance is not by itself a synonymous of being isolated from the world; on the contrary, to be able to socialize and communicate is crucial, so that the student can maintain motivated, and also so that he can take advantage of collaborative tools to create and share knowledge. Therefore the acquisition of soft and social skills are mandatory.

Web 2.0 and 3.0 is changing the way students learn. It has already changed the way they interact with each other and with the world. The social web is part of their daily lives, giving them the possibility to connect and share with peers their personal lives, through social networking. But they don't only use Internet socially, they use it to read the news, listen to music and also gather information about school

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