

Chapter 2.33

Social Networking Theories and Tools to Support Connectivist Learning Activities

M. C. Pettenati

University of Florence (IT), Italy

M. E. Cigognini

University of Florence (IT), Italy

ABSTRACT

This article considers the affordances of social networking theories and tools to build new and effective e-learning practices. We argue that “connectivism” (social networking applied to learning and knowledge contexts) can lead to a reconceptualization of learning in which formal, nonformal, and informal learning can be integrated as to build potentially lifelong learning activities to be experienced in “personal learning environments.” In order to provide a guide in the design, development, and improvement both of personal learning environments and in the related learning activities, we provide a knowledge flow model highlighting the stages of learning and the related enabling conditions. The derived model is applied in a possible scenario of formal learning

in order to show how the learning process can be designed according to the presented theory.

TOWARDS AN E-LIFELONG LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Formal, nonformal, and informal learning have become subjects of study and experimentation as for their potentialities to be carried on through the network. The pervasiveness of telematic technologies in current learning and knowledge processes justifies the hopes of success and emerging approaches become always more open, destructured, and nonformalised. According to this vision, formal, informal, and nonformal learning can be seen, such as integration of actions and situations, that can be developed both in the network and in

physical contexts. New reflections can therefore be made on the practice known as e-learning, starting from a revision of these dimensions. *Formal learning* has been defined as a type of learning that occurs within an organized and structured context (formal education, in-company training) and is intentional from the learner's perspective. Normally it leads to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate) (Cedefop, 2000; European Commission, 2000). As regards adults e-learning, formal education in the last decade has encountered and experimented a sort of paradox that often witnessed low returns in terms of knowledge acquisition, compared to cost investment, which is often significantly high. *Nonformal learning* has been defined as learning embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but that contain an important learning element. Nonformal learning is intentional from the learner's point of view (Cedefop, 2000). *Informal learning* is learning resulting from daily life activities related to work, family, or leisure. It is often referred to as experiential learning, and can, to a certain degree, be understood as "accidental" learning. It is not structured in terms of learning objectives, learning time, and/or learning support. Typically, it does not lead to certification. Informal learning may be intentional but in most cases, it is nonintentional (or incidental/random) (Cedefop, 2000). Informal learning is an adaptive process determined by the exploration need, which is realised in specific experiential contexts (Calvani, 2005). People acquire their competence in everyday life, talking, observing others, trying and making mistakes, working together with colleagues more or less expert. Informal learning can therefore be intended as the natural corollary of daily life (Bonaiuti, 2006). *Intentionality* of learning is a discriminating factor shifting "nonformal" learning in "nonintentional" or "incidental" learning; contrary to what happens in formal learning, informal learning is not neces-

sarily intentional and can be nonrecognized sometimes from the subject himself/herself as knowledge and competence acquisition (Cross, 2006). According to this perspective, aimed at retrieving and valuing the potentialities embedded in spontaneous contexts, in this case the network, the emerging domain of study of *informal e-learning* is receiving greater attention because of the widespread of social networking practices and technologies. The online transposition of the social network is nowadays referred to as "social networking" phenomena, and it is related to a set of available technologies and services allowing individuals to take part in network-based virtual communities. Social networking is emerging as a highly natural practice because it is deeply rooted in our daily behaviour; spontaneous relations, interactions, and conversations support informal learning practices, contributing to the creation and transmission of knowledge. In informal learning practices, the social behaviour and the support of technologies converge toward the "network"; a network made by people and resources, a *social network*, unified by personal needs or common goals, interaction policies, protocol and rules, and telematic systems all together favouring the growth of a sense of belonging to the "net" community.

At the same time, the culture of *lifelong learning* is gaining importance as one of the most effective answers to face the challenges brought by the information and knowledge society (Siemens, 2006): the rapid obsolescence of professional knowledge and skills requires updating and continuous training as well as recurring and personalised learning. Under these premises, the domain of e-lifelong learning is being configured as a sociotechnical system in which knowledge and learning are both the form and the content as for their social and relational meaning. The subject undergoing an e-lifelong-learning experience crosses this territory doing practices and strategies of continuous interconnection and com-

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