


Chapter 4

Temporal Asynchrony of Socio–Technical Devices in Distance Learning?

Origins of Cleavage Between Academics and Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is based on a research that has been focusing on social sharing device effects and on students' practices of collaboration, communication, and mediation. The author has analyzed the recurring temporal split between academic environment and students' sphere in a context of distance learning. The goal is to understand the origin of the collaborative process of collective apprenticeship which is illustrated in the communities of apprenticeship outside the academic institution. A netnographic observation was conducted with Bachelor and Master's degrees in a private training center. The author assumes the information and communication socio-technical devices participate in the horizontalization of student practices. The author has highlighted the paradox of these learning communities, which are, unwittingly, in a process of social domination by having choosing a priori a decentralized structure. In light of the social criticism of the time, the observation reveals that digital technologies cause a temporal acceleration.

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INTRODUCTION

In a first chapter issued in December 2013, we presented the results of research carried out among students registered in distance learning centers. We concluded that social networking formerly used in the private sphere is now in common use in academics. Some universities and training centers have taken coercive measures such as stopping access to Ethernet network. As for us, we think a collaborative process is a much better way to encourage active learning such as microblogging. Indeed, this interactional model is more appropriate as a computer-mediated communication device. Hence, we have been focusing on how students become familiar with a socio-technical tool implemented by professors. We have also identified the artefacts of microblogging on peer to peer mediation. To do so, we have undertaken participant observation by teaching the curriculum of Information and Relation Management, which represents our empirical field.

Our study lasted 4 months from November, 2012 to February, 2013 and the target audience was composed of 276 Bachelor students attending 5 courses of an hour (callconf). Twitter was used as a mediation channel combined with an institutional platform (LMS) and a students' blog. The aim was to initiate interactions between learners during callconfs and extend them afterwards in the private sphere. The gap between academic and personal environments promotes growing knowledge between peers. The first results were contrasting: pro microblogging students were a minority. Indeed, imposing on them a particular device can be crippling because freedom is essential to any learning community. On the contrary, those who became familiar with Twitter appreciated its flexibility such as the use of a community hashtag, for instance #ConfcallRS, giving them a sense of belonging. It came out that these collectives were naturally prone to intermediation: some students take the role of tutors, spontaneously initiating a mediation with their fellow classmates. Considering the emerging need to renew or diversify the various means of mediation, microblogging permits a dialogic style, communicational modalities and information sharing all of which essential to learning communities.

In this new chapter, we will deal with action research based on the conclusions of the previous experiment. That time, we have experimented a non-participant observation in which socio-technical devices were chosen by students themselves to create their own personal learning environment. The goal is to bring out the efficiency of collaborative learning observed in these epistemic communities.

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