Chapter 1.17

Social Networking and Personal Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

In social studies a social network is the set of relations that links people, through their interactions and familiarity of various kind. Today, however, social networking indicates a growing phenomenon, characterised by Web technologies that create and keep together groups of people on the basis of common interests. These tools (social software technologies) include for instance: blogs, podcasts, RSS feeds, social bookmarking, and offer new opportunities to promote collaboration, to assist conversations, to help in the sharing of knowledge, in work and learning contexts, both formal and informal. Although some of these tools are often used in LMSs, the main idea of this new approach is to consider the advantages coming from general purpose tools, widely available on the net, and characterised by an intrinsic vitality and spontaneity. In this context, also linked to a growing criticism of the current e-learning model, based on the extensive use of VLEs (virtual learning environments), new proposals oriented towards the definition of new models of Web spaces for personal learning (personal learning environment or virtual learning landscape) are being put forward. In these new systems the individual has a central place, in a network of resources and of social and friendly interactions that offer support on the emotional as well as on the cognitive level.

INTRODUCTION

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intrinsic vitality and spontaneity. In this context, also linked to a growing criticism of the current e-learning model, based on the extensive use of VLEs (*virtual learning environments),* new proposals oriented towards the definition of new models of Web spaces for personal learning (*personal learning environment* or *virtual learning landscape)* are being put forward. In these new systems the individual has a central place, in a network of resources and of social and friendly interactions that offer support on the emotional as well as on the cognitive level.

SOCIAL-SOFTWARE

In recent years, the availability of services and tools that enhance the creation of Web content by common users has grown enormously. Most of these "personal contributions" implicitly create interactions and connections among individuals on the net. It is not accidental that one talks of *social software,* referring to applications that make possible for people to interact and collaborate on line, particularly to create on-line communities. "Social software" is a term with a broad meaning, which includes systems and technologies used in various contexts: for this reason Terry Anderson (2005) has introduced the concept of e*ducational social software: "On line tools that support and encourage individuals to learn together with others, maintaining their control over time, space, presence, activities, identity and relationships".*

In this sense, specific tools such as *wiki*s (1) *and blogs,* acquire particular relevance.

Wiki

A Wiki is a special Web site that allows multiple users, to create and edit pages in real time. It has become emblematic of collaborative authoring of hypertextual documents, because one of the most widespread use is to allow different people to work at a distance, concurrently, on the same body of

pages interconnected via hyperlinks. The system keeps track of the modifications carried out and of previous versions (*versioning*) making it possible for a coordinator to accept or, if necessary, to reject the changes made by the collaborators. The use of wikis in e-learning is linked to collaboration, the feature that more than anything else distinguishes this technology. In all those instances in which there is a need to collectively write a text, wikis offer a valuable technical solution. Through the versioning mechanism it possible to follow the process of the elaboration of the text, whilst the hyperlink management system allows for the planning and the preparation of complex investigations. The ease with which one can create glossaries, dictionaries, terminological indexes or organized collections of thematic pages, makes it possible, in many subject domains, to develop very interesting research activities. Compared to the traditional face-to-face group work, wikis offer higher capabilities, because they allow a reflection starting from the very textual nature of the product, and the possibility to operate simultaneously amongst many individuals, remotely.

Teachers as well can find wikis very useful for working on projects, preparing articles, putting together course materials. A wiki is ideal, for instance, for collecting proposals and ideas for a conference or within a research project. However, the main strongness of wikis can also be seen as a weak point: the possibility offered to all to modify content. For this reason the majority of sites is somehow monitored to avoid intrusions, spam, and other abuses.

Blog

The term *blog* is the contraction of *Web log,* that is *"a log on the Web."* Blogs offer the possibility of writing quickly, without having any specific technical knowledge, notes, thoughts, reflections, texts of any kind, in the form of a Web page. The blog is probably the application that marks, more than any other, the transition from the *read only*

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