

Informal learning with social media and its potential for a democratisation of education

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In this paper I will shortly discuss the role of key competences in and for lifelong learning and will explain how informal learning can enrich lifelong learning. Then I discuss the role of social media in informal learning processes and point out some challenges and hopes regarding inclusion and exclusion issues in Web 2.0.

Key competences for lifelong learning

The European Parliament and the Council of the European Union (2006) have published recommendations on eight key competences for lifelong learning which are “necessary for personal fulfilment, active citizenship, social inclusion and employability in a knowledge society” (Council of the European Union 2010, p. 5). Beside communication in the mother tongue and in foreign languages, mathematical competence and basic competences in science and technology, learning to learn, social and civic competences, sense of initiative and entrepreneurship, cultural awareness and expression, digital competence is explicitly mentioned.

However, digital competence certainly comprises a basic understanding of information and communication technology, the recognition of patterns, the transfer of one's skills to new digital media applications, and a capability of ‘self-teaching’ (to a certain extent). Therefore, especially online spare time activities like discussing with other people in chatrooms, commenting or posting on weblogs, sharing knowledge in wikipedia or being involved in other online activities (cf. Schelhowe 2006, Thaler 2009) are of increasing importance for education processes as they enable informal learning processes and raise hopes for a democratic educational scenario.

Lifelong learning – informal learning

Elke Gruber (2008) emphasizes that especially in Austria the term ‘lifelong learning’ has been used synonymously with further and adult education, ignoring non-formal and informal education. Therefore she calls for a change of perspectives and advises especially for German speaking countries to move informal learning – defined as dialogues between individuals or with analogue and digital media (ibid.) – into the focus of educational research. Informal learning stands for different aspects like unplanned, incidental, implicit learning, and autodidactic learning situations and this broadens our understanding of learning in general:

„Learning is not only understood as consciously cognitive processing, but moreover as unconsciously psychological and emotional processing of information, i.e. holistic, conscious and unconscious, intentional and incidental, theoretical and practical processing of all forms of stimuli, impressions, information, encounters, experience, threats, demands, symbolic presentations, virtual environments etc. which human beings perceive and have to deal with.” (Dohmen 2001, p. 11, translation A.T.)

And my point is that informal learning can enable people, without access to formal education, to acquire necessary key competences which are not only useful in terms of employability but moreover to live a fulfilled life of active citizenship (Council of the European Union 2010, p. 5). However, an important feature of formal education is its recognition (certificates, etc.), but unfortunately informal learning activities are too often not accredited and although they actually enable people, for instance, to handle the latest information and communication technologies, especially in German speaking countries the recognition of formal education is highly regulated and therefore non-formal education is hardly recognised (Gruber 2008). Therefore, the European Union already puts pressure especially on Austria and Germany to adapt their rigid degree systems (OECD 2010).

Challenges and hopes of social media

One central question of inclusion and exclusion issues of Web 2.0 is, whether digital competence is distributed equally among different social groups. And there are considerations that it is not. For instance there are critical voices warning that social media technology is not gender democratic *per se* (Herring et al. 2004), especially spare time media; like TV, internet, and computer games conceal much implicit gendered information, for instance about technology and engineering as a gendered – masculinely connoted – topic (cf. Rommes 2002, Bath 2003, Thaler 2010).

Age is another crucial factor regarding capability and frequency of private computer and internet use. Although 60% of all European households (EU-27) have internet access (Lööf 2008), the usage is much higher among younger people. About 70% of young people (16 to 24 years old) use a computer and go online almost everyday, whereas this can be said only for 20% among 55 to 74-year-olds (European Commission 2008).

Taking Oskar Negt's definition of technological competence as “perceiving technology as a societal project” (Negt 1999, p. 228) into account – meaning a critical assessment of new technologies, consideration of risks, recognition of societal and ecological connections, and the refusal or adaption of technological artefacts or practices based on basic knowledge – one could assume that for instance older generations have different knowledge from younger generations. Thus age could be an important factor for equal inclusion in technology. But of

course there are more influencing factors, one has just to think about limited access to technology or energy – which foils considerations about the role of informal learning with social media to overcome boundaries of formal education.

Another thought is that facebook, blogs and twitter played a certain role during demonstrations, uprisings and revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt, Lybia, etc. (the so called ‘Arab spring’, see for instance: http://www.sourcewatch.org/index.php?title=Arab_Spring; <http://www.arabist.net/>). This gave hope that social media cannot only help to democratize learning processes but enable democratisation processes as well. But political analysts restrict such considerations critically, emphasizing that social media did not cause but only support revolutions and political movements which already existed:

„Facebook and Twitter are just places revolutionaries go – Cyber-utopians who believe the Arab spring has been driven by social networks ignore the real-world activism underpinning them“

(Quote from: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/mar/07/facebook-twitter-revolutionaries-cyber-utopians>)

And especially Arab women and their role should be made more visible – in the internet and in analogue media – because they were and are not only part of current uprising movements but – as Robin Morgan puts it – “women have been the most consistent advocates of civil society across region” (Morgan 2011, p.20).

To sum up, one educational goal should be that, regardless of any social category (age, gender, ethnicity, etc.), people should be technically competent because it is part of a “society-critical basic competence” (*gesellschaftskritische Grundkompetenz*, Brock et al. 2005). It is something “[...] every citizen should have in order to judge societal interrelations and to engage actively and critically constructively, alone or in the respective context of life and work.” (ibid., p. 1, translation A.T.).

And informal learning with social media gives hope of inclusive education: people can acquire – regardless their former formal education – necessary key competences for an active citizenship. But one question still remains: Is this hope true for all people?

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