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The Impact of Using Social Media in Adult Education

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In a knowledge based society, where ICT and intellectual capabilities have a main role, the use of ICT in order to improve the quality of education and training has started to be implemented more and more. Thus, in order to improve the quality of education and training, classic e-learning solutions need to be revised in order to include a more interactive approach, and as such Social Media has started to be more and more present in ICT learning solutions, either as platforms or as interactive content that can be accessed on premise by the beneficiaries of the educational product. Within this paper, the authors aim to conduct an analysis that would facilitate a presentation with regard to the way Social Media can improve the quality of adult training and education and how it affects conventional means of training and education either by improving existing electronic teaching methods or by having a negative aspect in some areas of education. The paper will analyse the recent developments in e-learning and how the inclusion of tools that are based more on Social Media influence learning outcomes, such as MOOC's or conventional e-learning platforms that have a more interactive approach in the last years that they originally had when they were developed, based on user feedback or the level through which Social Media has influenced web content. And based on these aspects the authors will identify aspects that could significantly improve certain e-learning technologies or learning techniques that imply the usage of ICT to reach their desired quality level of education.

Introduction

Taking into account the recent growths in social networks usage and in how people interact on social media driven websites through the use of ICT, recently more mobile based than in the past years, Social Media has become more and more e must-have in every internet based application and not only. Due to the growth of social media driven web content and also due to the increasing number of people that are using internet as a source of entertainment, relaxation, of information and even education, the authors of this paper consider that Social Media should be used in a more aggressive

manner in the field of education, and how current approaches of education through social media can be improved.

As such the paper will focus on how current adult education and learning is influenced by Social Media and how Social Media is used in different educational fields to get results.

Social Media in learning and education

Education and learning has been influenced in the last two decades more and more by the use and implementation of ICT technologies in schools and universities, through the wide access to technology that allows people to access information on-the-go, and through platforms and applications that are specifically designed and implemented for education purposes. Thus, e-learning as a whole has known improvements and is now mostly based on education through the use of internet based platforms like Moodle or Blackboard, and through the usage of computer assisted learning in universities and high schools.

As such the implementation and usage of e-learning platforms and the usage of ICT based learning has had a great impact on the ease of access to information for students, either being used as a means to provide additional information that cannot be covered in class, in a face-to-face learning environment, as a means to overcome the problems some countries have with their educational system due to the distance that students have to travel in order to benefit from conventional learning, or either through the blended approach that e-learning has made possible over the last decade. All aspects like the ones that have been mentioned above as examples, and more, have had a positive impact on how students perceive information and education in general and how conventional learning methods can benefit from ICT.

Although e-learning has improved on some educational aspects, and has been known to solve some issues that students faced in the past, where they only had conventional methods of learning, there are some aspects that have been shown not to be as efficient or attractive to students in the use of e-learning platforms and applications.

In order to benefit from a positive and efficient means of learning, daily social interactions are required between the involved parties, students and teachers on one hand, and on the other between students and their daily routine and social interactions (Alabdulkareem, 2015).

A number of researches have been made in the past in order to point out the impact that social media and using social interactions with the help of social networking, thus reports from the National School Board Associations in 2007 pointed out that approx. 93% of the youth used social networks and social media websites. Another report, done by the Pew Research Center in 2010 mentioned that 73% of teenagers use or incorporate forms of social networking or social media in their school activities (Casey & Evans, 2011).

As such, the manner in which information is distributed from instructors/teachers to students has a greater impact if they also interact when they are not necessarily present in class. The rate of which information is being transferred towards the students and the efficiency of how social media impacts the efficiency of transferring this information from instructor/teacher to students is highly dependent on the following aspects:

- The *digital literacy and social skills of instructors/teachers* – The amount of information and the quality of such information that is related to the courses that students take part of is dependent on how skilled the instructor/teacher is in making that information accessible beyond the boundaries of formal learning. Also, if the instructors/teachers lack in digital literacy, as most adults do in Europe, information that could be transferred towards the students in a more interactive and appealing manner will be reduced in both quality and quantity.
- The *digital literacy and social skills of students* – As with the case of the instructors/teachers, the amount and quantity of information that can be accessed by students also suffers from the skills and competences that the students have in the domain of ICT and social skills. Thus if the information is clearly made available by the instructors/teachers in an appealing manner but the receiving end of the educational process lacks the required skills and competences to access it then the learning process will be faulty.
- The *quality of the platforms* used – This aspect refers to the tool that the instructors/teachers decide to use in order to socially interact with their students as to better improve the communication between them and the manner through which the information is transferred, thus the instructors/teachers will have to find a social platform or a social media application that can facilitate the transfer of information and the quality of interaction required so as to provide a fast and efficient manner of learning.
- The *quantity of information* – By this, the authors refer to the fact that social media should have a ratio between the quantity of information that reaches the students and the quality of this information. Due to the social interaction aspect that social media generally has, trying to facilitate the transfer of a big amount of information towards the students through such instruments differs in impact. Thus using social media in classrooms in order to improve the participation and interaction of students and in order to make the process of learning more appealing to newer generations, the quantity of information can be as high as classical means of education, but if instructors/teachers would use the same amount of information on a social media platform where interactions are more related to social aspects than educational aspect of the people interested in learning, then the amount of information that actually manages to reach the students will be lower of that in class.

Another aspect that has an impact on how education is affected by social media is related to when and what type of social media approach is used. Through this the authors want to point out the difference of between using a social media driven e-learning platform or a social media driven network and that of classic e-learning platforms.

As it is known, e-learning platforms are tools that can be used in either distance learning or blended learning and that provide advantages and disadvantages to both students and instructors/teachers alike. Although there are more advantages than disadvantages when using an e-learning platform, there is some disadvantages of these that has been pointed out in studies, and that is the lack of interaction between the instructor/teacher (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014) and students and the fact that these platforms are quite static in content and how information is presented.

Aspects regarding the fact that conventional e-learning approaches are static in nature and do not offer a means of efficient interaction and communication between the participants of the learning process are being constantly tackled by e-learning providers as the need for interaction and appealing means of presenting information rise, thus e-learning platforms have started to implement social media aspects and e-learning providers try, through MOOCs, to bridge the gap that social media websites have to offer in order to fully give an immersive and modern approach on education.

Improving approaches on Social Media in Adult Education

As mentioned, the main purpose of this paper is to identify and propose improvements on the current approaches and possibilities that the use of Social Media has in Adult Education. Thus, after analyzing the following ICT technologies that are used in Adult Education: e-learning platforms, m-learning, VR education, education through the use of Social Networks; the authors will propose possible improvements to these approaches.

1. *E-learning platforms – “Traditional e-learning platforms, or learning management systems (LMSs), provide holistic environments for delivering and managing educational experiences. They present suites of tools that support online course creation, maintenance, and delivery, student enrollment and management, education administration, and student performance reporting”* (Dagger et al., 2007). As the authors that utilized the definition presented earlier described e-learning platforms, it can be noticed that e-learning platforms provide an array of tools and functionalities that are more based around the instructor/educator than on the end-user, the student. Although e-learning platforms have been used since Web 2.0 started being used and there is a continuous growth in the use of such platforms in all mediums, from workplaces for informal and non-formal education, to Higher Education where Universities use these platforms for distance learning or blended learning methods, the approach on them has not changed.

Although e-learning platforms have more advantages than disadvantages, the approach these platforms have on education and learning is the main cause of their main disadvantages such as the lack of interaction between the instructor/teacher or the static manner through which information is presented to the students. In the light of such issues, an alternative to classic e-learning platforms, MOOCs [4] have started to implement social media aspects that help improve the rate of interaction between instructors/teachers and students. As such, we consider that the direction in which e-learning platforms are heading, by implementing a means of combining the utility of classic tool based LMSs and the social interaction and activities that are present in social media driven websites that offer informal and non-formal learning, through the use of dynamic content, the implementation of social networking aspects in them and other such improvements represents, in the authors opinion the ideal direction in which these platforms can improve in order to facilitate quality education for adults.

Table 1. E-learning platforms vs. Social Media Educational websites

E-learning platforms		Social media educational websites	
Advantages	Disadvantages	Advantages	Disadvantages
Cost efficient	Static	Cost efficient	Doubtful information
Accessible	Impersonal	Accessible	Distracting social interaction
Ease of use	Lack of social interactions	Engaging	
Can be linked to formal education		Appealing	Informal or non-formal education
Content updated by professionals		Quantity of users	Content driven by users

As it can be seen in the table above, when referring to e-learning platforms and comparing them to what social media websites that are used for learning there are a number of issues that can be solved by implementing ICT solutions that make the best of both approaches by combining the advantages and the aspects that are appealing to users with the utility and quality of information from the other approach thus application developers could implement either e-learning platforms that are more social media orientated if not even social network orientated in order to improve the manner in which the learning participants engage with each other and with the information that is presented to them.

2. *M-learning* – taking into account the fact that mobile devices have started to surpass the quantity of conventional ICT products that people use (PC/Laptop) and that information is required to be formatted and designed for such devices, the concept of m-learning has started to grow in importance. M-learning is based on providing education through the mean

of mobile devices via web content that is specifically designed for mobile devices or through the use of applications that have been designed for such purposes. As with the case of e-learning platforms, m-learning has advantages and disadvantages in regards to how information is passed on to users. Thus, one major disadvantage of m-learning is represented by the fact that information has to be structured in a manner that allows less social interaction between the participant of the learning process, if made as a stand-alone application. This disadvantage can be countered, in our opinion, with designing mobile applications as a means to link e-learning platforms to mobile devices, by implementing social interaction related functionalities rather than focusing just on information.

Although the information that is passed on through the use of mobile devices is inferior in quantity when compared to conventional e-learning means, the quality and the manner in which it is presented is more appealing for most users than that available on e-learning platforms. This is related to the fact that the technology used to make this information available to mobile users is highly dependent on social media and how it interacts with the user's social life and interests, thus applications that are designed as introductory courses for basic users have social media aspects implemented into them in order to make them more appealing for the users.

3. *VR Education*, or learning through the use of Virtual Reality is not a new concept, being used in serious gaming simulators around the world, starting with flight simulators to driving class simulator. VR Education has started in the last 5 years to gain more and more attention due to the advances in ICT and the quality of the immersive environment. Thus there are now experiments done with regards to the impact that VR has on different field of education, most of these being linked to higher education and with the medical field. The linkage with the medical field is more obvious due to the fact that medical students can witness surgeries or medical techniques first hand and in various scenarios that are not as easy to experience in their training and education without substantial investment done by the educational provider. VR is starting to be used in various domains that require creativity or in domains that have high costs of real life simulations. There are also studies that make use of VR to simulate virtual classrooms (Ausburn & Ausburn, 2004) in order to facilitate the learning experience people receive from participating in class, having immense possibilities to include people with locomotor dysfunctions attend classes in a relatively psychologically relaxing manner.

4. *Social networks in education* – a number of studies (Roblyer, 2010; Wise & Skues, 2011) have been made in order to try and point out the positive impact that using social networks like Facebook or Twitter can have on education, some in adult education fields but mostly focusing on Higher Education. These studies have shown that although the outcomes of using social networks cannot be directly linked with the skills and competences adults and students gain from interacting through social networks, there are positive influences in regards with using social networks as a bridge between students and instructors/teachers and that social networks can be

useful tools in overcoming the communication barrier that usually hinders students and teachers in creating a stronger collaborative relationship.

The main social networks that make up the studies basis are Facebook and Twitter, although some studies (Yuen & Yuen, 2008) refer to social networks specially made for educational purposes, these networks being tailored around courses or e-learning platforms which in turn have a better impact on students. On the adult part of education though, specialized social networks or localized social networks that collaborate with various learning platforms are not as efficient, due to either the lack of information that adults have regarding those social networks, the fact that they require a localized account or the fact that adults lack the digital skills required to interact with such social networks. Thus the use of social networks in adult education and training is rather scarce and inefficient.

As social networks continue to be involved more and more in daily activities, the authors consider that developers that are constantly improving these social networks should explore the educational possibilities of their applications, giving them the possibility of being linked and connected with other educational tools and applications in order to provide a more interactive and immersive experience of non-formal and informal learning. Through this, we consider that implementing certain optional aspects that users can activate at their free will in both the educational applications/platforms and in the social network of choice, that refer to including feeds about new information in certain fields or the possibility of connecting with other people that are interested in certain fields or even the suggesting courses that people could follow based on their hobbies or recent internet activities, should be included as to allow people that are interested in obtaining certain skills and competences through the use of social interactions to obtain them.

Conclusions

As social interactions through the use of ICT become more and more present in everyday chores, and as ICT is starting to be used in more and more fields, from education to economy, from medical use to smart cities, the need for digital skills and literacy will grow. With the growth of digital literacy and with the implementation of more and more ICT based technologies in everyday aspects of life, education and training will have to adapt to the needs of adults in order to provide a better means of obtaining skills and competences in a knowledge based society. Thus adult education will have to make use of every aspect that makes lifelong learning appealing towards adults in order to improve the quality of educational services provided and to train and educate adults in non-formal and informal manners in order to help them adapt to the evolving needs of society where skills and competences, that are not always obtained through formal means, are more and more required.

The advances in ICT and how these are implemented in education are always improving the quality of education that reaches the end users but if developers, trainers, instructors and teachers will only make use of static non-engaging tools for education then the students and adults that benefit from such training and education will not be compelled to use such tools where the emphasis is on ease-of-use, interactivity and connectivity, and thus educational platforms and educational approaches will have to adapt again to the realities of society in order to provide quality education for all age ranges.

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