

Microblogging - more than fun?

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Abstract

For the support of learners of tomorrow a mobile workforce is essential in our connected society. More and more social network sites are growing up. Google launches software for mobile devices; the market is growing. But the question, which rises is: is mobile learning just a future term, or does it become reality? Can these tools be useful in teaching and learning processes? And what does mobile learning mean for networks and communities of practice? Some of these questions we try to answer. We set up a microblogging community channel about our work and research topic e-learning. In shortest time we reach 23 participants. We tested our microblogging community locally in our offices and mobile from our mobile devices. In this article we discuss advantages and disadvantages from microblogging from our point of view.

Keywords: Mobile learning; microblogging; community of practice

1. Mobile learning - trend or concept?

Bearing in mind that only few years ago e-Learning was characterized by a rigid learning platform where students and teachers connected from predefined computers with Internet connection this situation has changed dramatically in the last months. Lecturers and learners use various resources on the web with their personal computers, maybe with WLAN or at least with high bandwidth access. Internet technologies and education gets closer and closer – we like to constitute it as ubiquitous: so called u-Learning. From our point of view the next step towards digital learning is that the term mobility is not only seen in connection with “accessibility from home, university or a defined placed”. Furthermore “anywhere” should not restrict to certain places – learning and information retrieval from the place where we currently need is the requirement of tomorrows’ students. By using and looking to our cell phones these scenarios became imaginable, but a lot of research in this area will be necessary. In this paper we address to mobile Learning (m-Learning) in general and focus on a first practical example of doing microblogging with and without mobile phones.

The world will turn more and more mobile. Knowledge workers will act in a global world without static borders. They interact more and more in virtual teams, distributed all over the world. With the Bologna process in Europe students will have to be more and more mobile. «Because of the increasing use of mobile technologies in society and by the younger generation, learners will demand course materials be delivered on mobile technologies to be accessed from anywhere and at anytime. At the same time, today’s and tomorrow’s learners will be nomadic and continuously on the move. As learners move from one location to the next, they must be able to use the infrastructure in the different locations to access learning materials. Hence, learning materials must be designed for easy access by the nomadic learners using mobile technology regardless of where they are located and which network infrastructure they are using to access information» (Ally, 2007).

But the definition of mobile learning is still unclear: «Some advocates of mobile learning attempt to define and conceptualise it in terms of devices and technologies; other advocates define and conceptualise it

in terms of the mobility of learners and the mobility of learning, and in terms of the learners' experience of learning with mobile devices.» (Traxler, 2007).

Mobile learning can also be defined as learning with books because they are mobile too, but today mobile learning often means learning with digital mobile devices like PDAs or cell phones. Mobile devices can be implemented in teaching and learning settings a plurality of forms (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005, p. 31), for example connectivity for spontaneous communication and collaboration amongst learners, beaming of stored information from device to device, location-awareness, giving instant information about projects within sight, portable sound-recording and voice-recording or cameras for taking photos and making video clips. Learning with mobile devices don't consequently mean reading only text on a mobile screen, interactive forms like making films, recording voices, taking pictures, and so on are also forms of mobile learning. But until now the most of the projects realised were support projects (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler, 2005, p. 42). Not very amazing if we notice that in 2005 mobile phones were mostly restricted to some text lines, with a poorly camera and without any internet connection.

Nowadays Nokia launched for example the model N95 with WLAN, 5 Megapixel camera and blogging system on board. Apple is starting his famous iPhone and Sony and Erricson are selling similar devices. It seems that the "next-generation" of cell phones has arrived and this leads also to an interesting phenomen: The cell phone is not only a tool for calling anyone – it is our digital attendant, independently if we like to make a call, take a photo, to look at a video, to contribute or to share some stuff or get connected with the Internet. By realizing the power of these current devices we should think about how we can use it for learning and teaching, bearing in mind that a learner of tomorrow will use these devices. As Mark Prensky (Prensky, 2001) for the first time wrote about Digital Natives and Digital Immigrants he mentioned that new mobile devices will be not new for our children, even more it will be normal for them to have internet access with their personal digital assistant. This leads to the assumption that we have to rethink our learning and teaching behaviour and to focus our research to the use of mobile applications.

2. Microblogging as a form of mobile learning

Today maybe the most important and visible field of Web 2.0 technologies are weblogs, shortly called blogs: A frequently updated website consisting of data entries arranged in reverse chronological order as Walker described (Walker, 2005). People are writing and discussing about various topics, from private to scientific topics and it seems that each topic is represented within the Blogosphere. "From a sample size of around 2 million US people, US Web stats company Compete concludes that social networking sites are quickly approaching the traffic level of the big portals like Google and Yahoo" (MacManus, 2006). The amazing growth of Weblogs seems to be the success of three factors: Usability, Collaboration and Personality:

- It is easy to blog (Usability): No special skills are necessary to create a new contribution
- It makes fun (Collaboration): People connect with each other, discuss topics they are interested in
- It belongs to me (Personality): Contributions are written from a subjective perspective. The own opinion can be published and reflects the own thoughts and feelings.

Without any doubt weblogs play an important role in our daily work with the WorldWideWeb. It is interesting to notice that once technology is established the next one is waiting to start – microblogging. The consistent continuation of writing short essays is to write mini-messages to the web. "A form of blogging that lets you write brief text updates about your life on the go and send them to friends and interested observers via text messaging, instant messaging, email or the web" can be read as definition at Wikipedia (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Micro-blogging>).

If we blog why we need microblogging? A question often has been addressed to the authors the last months. Maybe a similar question occurred in the beginning of Internet area: If we have email, why we need SMS? However we should think about this possibility, bearing in mind that blogging and microblogging are two different things. Weblogs are mainly used for writing short essays and thoughts. Microblogging is about posting updates, ideas or simply quick notifications (McFedries, 2007). Java (Java et al., 2007) claimed three types fo microblogging: information sharing, information seeking and friendship-wise relationship.

From this point of view the authors addressed to following research question: "Is microblogging a possibility for a specific community to exchange ideas, interests and information?"

2.1. Design of the study

For our study we used the service Jaiku (<http://www.jaiku.com>) that provides a simple form of communication. Similar to other applications as Twitter (<http://www.twitter.com>) or Pownce (<http://www.pownce.com>) it is easy to share information or opinions. The newest message is written in the blank field on the top and by pressing post it appears as first contribution.

The Online-service also allows creating so called Channels to specific topics. Each user can (if allowed) subscribe to it and follow the channel. We set up a Jaiku group with the purpose to discuss about learning and teaching by using digital technologies. The given community name was eLearn. Further a special Flickr account was created to allow posting pictures within the channel. Afterwards well-known German EduBloggers were invited to subscribe to the channel. Until now 23 people joined the community, five women and 18 men.

2.2. Evaluation Results

The community was founded on 6th September 2007. Until 31.10.2007 240 postings were made, and 201 comments were left.

	Postings (n=240)	Comments (n=201)
User (n=23)	10,4 P/U	8,7 C/U
Online Days (56d)	4,3 P/d	3,6 C/d

Table 1: Postings and Comments of the community

Table 1 shows an overview about the activities of the community. About ten Postings per user and nearly nine comments per user show that there was not only information exchange but also small discussions. The main focus of interest is of course e-learning. Nevertheless a lot of different contributions were carried out: from news to tool-tips. At the end we also like to know about how the experts are thinking about microblogging? What are their feelings and experiences? An online survey should help to carry out the potential of this kind of working and knowledge-sharing.

Question 1: Who's blogging? On average the asked population was 42 years old, the youngest was 27, the oldest was 60 years old. The main part of our community are men (78%), 22% were women.

Question 2: How often are you microblogging in general? As you can see in Figure 2, most of the respondents blog several times to once a week. 22% are only blogging sporadic, just from conferences.

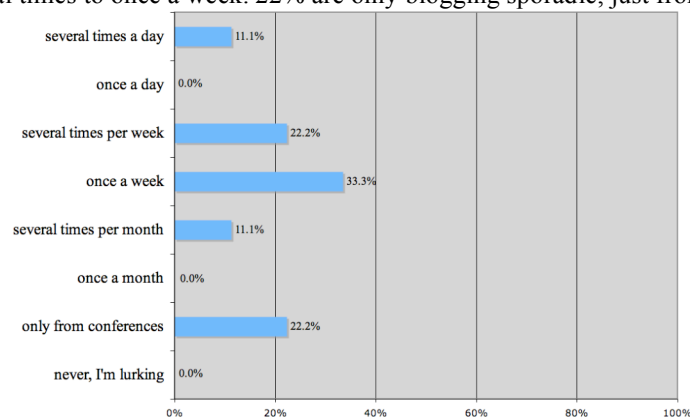


Figure 1: How often you are blogging (n=10)?

Question 3: About which topics do you mostly blogging? Live Reports from conferences and common workings are the main categories to blog followed by announcements and literature tips. Other topics are to arrange one's idea and ideas from the working process.

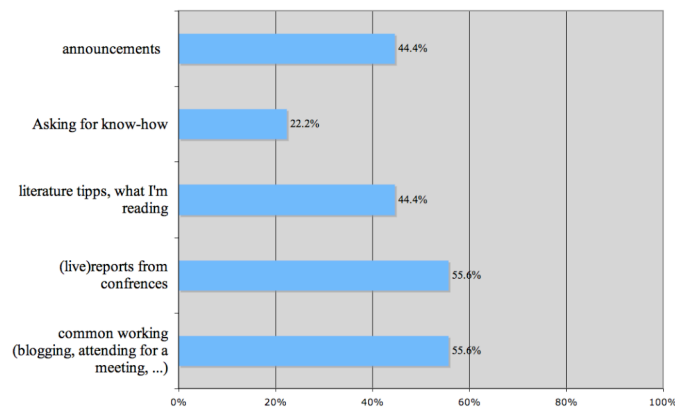


Figure 2: Topics (multiple answers were possible, n=10)

Question 4: What was the reason to contribute to the eLearn channel? Another reason which was furthermore mentioned are fast and easy community building. Not surprising most of the microblogger have a normal weblog (87.5%), only 12.5% are not writing an own weblog.

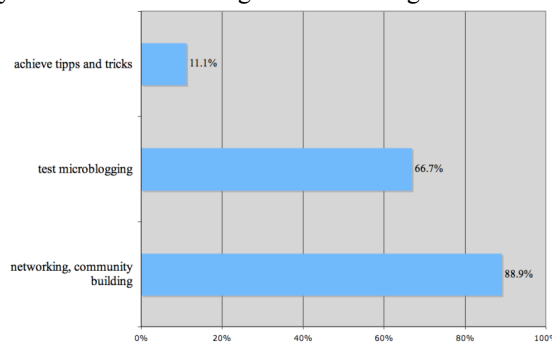


Figure 3: Motivation to blog (multiple answers were possible)

Question 5: What are the main differences between blogging and microblogging? Most of the respondents don't write long texts compared to their normal blogs. For them microblogging is much easier and faster. Normal blogs were seen as tools for knowledge saving, coherent statements and discourse. Microblogging is used most for writing about their thoughts and quick reflections. In a normal blog the respondents write less and more deliberate.

Question 6: What do you think about the potential of microblogging? The answers were different. Some people are not sure if there is a potential at all. Others regard the (fast) exchange of thoughts, micro-news, information and experiences for a potential. It's also regarded suitable to ask for help, for fast discussions and for short live statements (e.g. from a conference). One said: «It's suitable for the creation of virtual collaboration communities, whereas the main focus is to feel the "continuous partial presence". The so-called soft information and communication, which in real communities of practices is said by the way. It's like a virtual coffee machine as a meeting place.»

Question 7: When do you think makes microblogging no sense? *No potential for microblogging* is to write articles or for controversy or long reports, for information which you want archive and for reflection and discussions. But what can be the *potential especially for teaching and learning*? More over half of the participants (55.6%) think that microblogging is suitable for learning and teaching in future. One third (33.3%) is not sure, if there is potential. If they see potential in microblogging, we asked them for reasons. They think, that learners are accustomed to send information fast, in the same way like Skype or other instant messengers. It may be useful for fast exchanges of thoughts and information and to work together in «communities loosely joined»: it's for the people an alternative to common courses like Blackboard, Moodle, and so on, which most of the time won't be agile and to common social software forms like Facebook, etc., because it's more noncommittal and free. But it has to be integrated with other learning tools.

Question 8: Are you using Jaiku mobile? Are you blogging with your mobile phone? A little bit more than half of the respondents are blogging mobile (55.6%), 44.4% don't use jaiku mobile. Mostly they blog

pictures or commentaries mobile, because it's practical, especially when they left their laptops at home. But they only blog short statements, not long texts. It's funny and uncomplicated. For some persons there is a high demand to use it mobile for discreet community building, especially if they are en-route and mobile.

3. Discussion and Forecast

A lot of experiences were gathered the last two months about the power and potential of microblogging in scientific context. With the help of the mobile client postings and comments were done from nearly everywhere. Announcements as well as relevant information chunks from the Internet or presentation appeared within this community. Some members asked the channel about special experiences with tools in the behaviour of e-learning. Maybe the most interesting discussions resulted after postings from conferences. Statements of other experts, opinions or new publications in the area resulted in amazing reactions of the community. «Mobile devices are transforming notions of space, community and discourse» (Traxler, 2007). In a certain case one member asked within a comment a question to a contribution live from a conference. Afterwards this question was asked in the presentation room to the expert. Microblogging used as fast communication and exchange of information.

Nevertheless also the result of the evaluation pointed out that there are differences between normal microbloggers and our topic-centered community: In our community the aspect of virtual omnipresence (McFedries, 2007, p. 84) isn't on focus. Our community don't blog every day, mostly once a week. The main focus for us is to connect each other and to inform about interesting things about e-learning. The community aspect is the highest motivation to join the jaiku group. This aspect is similar to the findings of Java, Finin, Song & Tseng (2007). Mobile learning can take education back out into the home, the workplace and the community (Kukulka-Hulme & Traxler, 2005, p. 42). Working and exchanging small information chunks is the strength of microblogging in the same way as discussion with a community about current news and interests. Users can be attending with their mobile devices and they do it, as the evaluation results have shown. Bearing in mind that these kinds of devices are part of our lives and that of our children it is easily imaginable that we are contributing to different channels. We like to express that these forms of information can be used in various settings and enhance our daily working routine or learning behaviour. Although learning is an active cognitive process on the part of the learner, it is also a social process and develops through conversation (Dewey, 1916). Communication is an essential part through all learning processes and microblogging can extend our possibilities.

We like to end with our "microblogging-assumption": If it is from interest what a scientific colleague is reading, writing, thinking or using than you should create a channel and invite him/her to subscribe.

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