



Interactive Social Media for Informal Learning and Empowerment – the Project Isabel

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Abstract

This paper describes the use of interactive social media for informal learning and empowerment using the example of the EU project ISABEL which is part of the Lifelong Learning Programme.

How can educational institutions adapt to the new era of learning and teaching? In which way are Web 2.0 applications useful in promoting informal learning and empowerment of groups and communities?

Digital Media have an important role in everyday life, in culture as well as in education. They are offering the opportunity to learn within both informal and formal approach. Responding to the need to improve and update an educational system in an Europe with more and more digital natives digital media, especially interactive ones, may become an important didactical tool to promote Key and Transversal competences, basic skills and skills bartering. Based on the use of media production and ICT innovative practices - such as Community Reporting - the EU project ISABEL (Interactive Social Media for Integration – Skills Bartering – Empowerment – Informal Learning) is aimed at empowering people and communities to ensure that they are playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing and disseminating news and information in their community.

The project is centered in the elaboration of a methodology based on the question how to train and educate so-called “Community Reporters” who act as reporting leaders and vehicle the activities to other community members involving them in providing local user generated content and then networking it to a wider audience. By the use of an interactive ICT mashing up platform containing Web TV, Blogging, and Social Network ISABEL will become an environment for informal and innovative learning, setting up a process in which people belonging to a given community become leaders of social participation and competence exchange at intergenerational and intercultural level. Strengthening inter-personal and inter-cultural links, empowerment of groups and getting communities talking to each other are just some of the focused aims. ISABEL processes will be realized at different social domains and target groups in Europe. E-democracy might be seen as one of the EU common themes. Community reporting working as a bottom-up initiative can change, improve and advance our education system on an European level.

1. Introduction

The reality of media shapes increasingly our everyday lives. It receives a central role for our communication and for obtaining, conserving and transforming of knowledge. New Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), such as interactive social media, enable new paths to successful learning and make it possible to structure new scopes of knowledge. Today, we have new chances for learning and knowledge acquisition irrespective of geographical or social borders. Digital Media play an important role in everyday life and education, thereby offering the opportunity to learn within both informal and formal approaches. New learning environments and educational processes are steadily rising and forming an increasing networked society.

The pressing need to improve and update educational systems within societies featuring a growing presence of so-called “digital natives,” has made ICTs a key component to modernization. ICTs have become an important didactical tool used in order to promote media literacy, transversal competences and basic skills like team work and self-dependence alongside the transfer of pure expert knowledge.



Web 2.0 practices develop inexorably and shape a new style of interactive learning with new ICTs. At the same time, innovative Web 2.0 practices such as community reporting can be used as tools of empowerment for groups and communities.

2. The Role of Digital Media in Education

It is increasingly evident that contemporary discussions display a transition from an information society to a knowledge society. In contrast to the information society, the knowledge society characterizes itself by featuring the human being, his skills and values. Vocational and professional training must respond to these changes, particularly to the rising tide of information and knowledge which surrounds us in everyday life and which demands different skills and competences.

Vocational and professional training is thus faced with providing assistance in coping with the flood of information and knowledge. We need new competences which allow a flexible use of knowledge, enable the use of new technologies, provide information and knowledge, communication and cooperation as well as democratic thinking and acting. In an increasingly networked society, it is important that we not only have application-related knowledge but also develop media literacy including a democratic consciousness and the evaluation and assessment of information.

Therefore we need to develop a new learning culture. The basis of this learning culture is the idea of lifelong learning. The Project ISABEL faces these requirements and aims to promote essential skills. The project provides, through the use of media, media skills, technical know-how and Web 2.0 applications, participatory journalism, especially in the handling of information and participation in social discourse.

Teaching and learning no longer takes place in an environment in which the teacher and learner assume opposite active and passive roles. A new culture of learning is, in contrast, based on a constructivist view of learning. The aim is to provide applicable knowledge to bridge the gap between knowledge and action. Knowledge is therefore no longer receptively processed but rather actively acquired. In sum, we can conclude that learning is an active, self-directed, constructive, social and situational process [1]. ISABEL tries to inspect all dimensions of formal and informal learning to facilitate a vast understanding of media literacy.

3. ISABEL

3.1 The project's aims

According to the proposal the project responds to one of the long-term strategic objectives of EU education and training policies: promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. [2]

But how do we reach these strategic objectives?

As previously mentioned, all organizations and individuals involved in communication processes can no longer trust global accepted knowledge and experiences. They have to capture the constantly emerging new information to integrate it into their existing knowledge in order to keep afloat. But the opportunity to participate in social information and knowledge flow is an important chance to accomplish active citizenship structures. A media based approach to knowledge and information leads to a higher level of participation and decision-making motivation [3]. This reinforces one of project ISABEL's main objectives: Empowering people to ensure that their voices are heard.

In learning processes based on interactive communication, teaching occurs passively, the learner is to the fore, in order to facilitate the purchase of new competences. The training sessions for community reporters are taking place in learning environments where self-directed learning is possible [3].

With the use of interactive social media, in this case community reporting, project ISABEL sets a holistic approach to media literacy in practice. It will integrate the various aspects of media education work: informative, discursive, reflective, creative and technical aspects [4].

Media literacy can be best purchased by the independent use of media. Every person is media literate. In terms of media literacy transfer (in the sense of awareness about the background of media communication and an action-oriented media use) media projects make it possible to acquire media literacy almost incidentally [5]. After all, someone who creates media will know how it functions and how it can be used to manipulate individuals. Competent media users – so called digital residents as Kruse remarked, are able to select content specifically and critically deal with it [6]. Community media and participatory media such as Web 2.0 services provide room for creativity as well as stimulate communication processes, which contribute to local government information and make electronic media more transparent [7]. The idea of community reporting spring from People's Voice Media, a not for profit community development organization that



specialize in using social media as a community engagement tool to support communities to have a voice [8].

This participatory approach reflects the goals pursued by the project ISABEL:

1) Empowerment of communities at social and territorial level:

The "user-generated content" allows users to create their own web platforms and customize them with text, video or audio contributions. Learners are intrinsically motivated to do this and work goal-oriented [9]. Due to typical Web 2.0 features like ratings, links and comments, users are no longer restricted to creating isolated contributions for themselves, but work together [10].

2) Strengthening inter-personal & intercultural links:

ISABEL processes will be enacted at different social domains, from disadvantaged communities to university student networks. Community Reporters become leaders of social participation and skills bartering at intergenerational and intercultural levels.

3) Getting communities to talk to each other:

Communication as part of media literacy is a basic phenomenon. The media educator Baacke emphasizes that communicative competence is a basic skill featured in each individual. Communication is a basic process of human society and can be viewed as a culturally and socially justified life activity of every human [3].

4) Promoting personal and collective growth:

By networking e.g. linked weblogs and by the direct exchange, two-way communication is supported. This is a decentralized form of exchange. The combination of public and personal communication makes different scopes of social networking possible. Experiencing "my voice is heard" strengthens the self-confidence of the community reporters.

5) Empowering people to ensure that their voices are heard; participation & competence exchange:

Web 2.0 applications such as blogs, podcasts or vodcasts create and support a counter-public. That means that marginalized voices can be transmitted through Web 2.0 to the public. Web 2.0 media are a medium of participation, dialogue and foster a collaborative exchange between people with similar interests [11].

With regards to project ISABEL, a digital media combining interactive platforms containing Web TV, Blogging, Forum, Social Network becomes an environment for informal learning. This collaboration sets up a process in which people belonging to a given community become leaders of social participation and competence exchange. Project ISABEL therefore pursues an informal learning culture with the aim of further training people, regardless of culture and age, with the use of community reporters. These community reporting leaders will then pass on their knowledge and issues to other members of the community. They will involve them in providing local UGC then networking to a wider audience.

3.2 Proceeding of the project

The primary aim of ISABEL is to elaborate a methodology working as a tool to train and educate so-called "Community Reporters." The project aims to assess the impact of Interactive Social Media on the field of learning and educating in Europe as well as to see where Europe stands in terms of using Web 2.0 innovations like Web TV, blogging or podcasts in the domain of (informal) learning.

The project partners focus on the following results:

1) Stakeholder analysis

Every partner will identify and analyze existing practices of community reporting initiatives as well as stakeholders and organizations which will be reached by ISABEL.

2) Organizational and Methodological model

Its goal is to achieve a common knowledge base and a methodology which combines community reporter training steps with key competences.

3) Training of community reporters

The creation of community reporters aims to first identify the learning groups, assess specific learning goals and then apply community reporting leaders.

4) Experimentation activities with different target groups

The project will seek to encourage and promote the exchange of competencies and bridge the digital divide for disadvantaged communities through the use of citizen journalism and acquisition of new skills.

5) Validation and Evaluation

4. Conclusion and Prospect

Information and new communication technologies (such as web 2.0) are characterized by an increasing proliferation of applications. Through their use we attain more flexible learning opportunities. The



applications of new ICTs belong to a daily routine and lead to new competencies and "skills." These 'skills' are needed and adopted by the individuals today in self-learning appropriate [12]. In the modern media world, we are all passersby of knowledge as the old hierarchization (teacher – learner) fades away. Global information can now be brought into everyone's home. Web 2.0 applications like citizen journalism characterize today's information age and form new communication, action, learning and knowledge spaces [13].

Web 2.0 services are aimed particularly at users with comparatively low technical skills. In recent years a rapid proliferation of blogs, podcasts and similar Web 2.0 services has therefore occurred. Call Jörissen and Marotzki (2009) see Web 2.0 technologies as a participation tool, which is characterized by a very simple user interface which makes the user simultaneously become the producer (User + Producer) [14].

Web 2.0 provides to different learning skills (structuring, research, cooperating, producing, presents Ireland) their appropriate technologies. Media is not to be understood only as a tool in the learning process, but it is such an integral part of modern society, that its use has become an active part of social participation [10]. Even nowadays it still seems difficult to integrate the use of media in teaching and training situations. The competence to use media is not seen as one of the most important competencies by teachers, trainers or tutors [15]. Here, educational institutions should support the continuing professional development of their staff members. Since media literacy of teachers/trainers is a key for higher quality in lifelong learning all over Europe.

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