

Exploring the personal and self-directed use of weblogs

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Abstract—In recent years educators and researchers have started to explore conditions and requirements in formal and informal educational settings for the development of personal learning environments and their self-directed digital instrumentation. This workshop contribution discusses how a re-design of master level courses created an impulse for students to explore the personal use of weblogs as an instrument for supporting their study practises. Preliminary results of a small case study conducted at the Institute of Informatics at Tallinn University, Estonia, show the development of a range of use patterns that can be interpreted as an expression of different levels of control and ownership that students have gained over this particular type of digital instrument. The paper ends with an outline of potential steps for further research in this regard.

Keywords—*personal learning environment; shift of control, self-directed learning; digital instrumentation; course re-design*

I. CURRICULA DEVELOPMENT AND RE-DESIGN OF COURSES

The Institute of Informatics at Tallinn University in Estonia currently runs four master level programmes: Management of information technology (started in 2002); Teacher of computer science, school ICT manager (started in 2002); Interactive media and knowledge environments (started in 2006); and Educational technology (started in 2010). The two more recent curricula differ to a great extent from the curricula initiated in 2002. Although the framework and the overall structure of all of these curricula are the same (according to the requirements dictated by an official curriculum design guide of the university), the overall philosophy, the role of technology, the teaching approaches and design of some courses of the last two curricula are different. The initial inspiration to fundamentally re-design educational experiences in a formal higher education setting came from the iCamp research and development project funded by the European Commission under the IST (Information Society Technology) programme of FP6 (www.icamp.eu) and was initiated at Tallinn University by two teachers/researchers. The underlying intent of re-designing courses was the creation of conditions that would allow students to express and actualise self-direction in education [1]. This required the re-configuration of patterns of control and responsibility over instructional functions, including the personal instrumentation with digital, networked tools and services. One crucial aspect of this re-

design effort was the intentional avoidance of rather closed, centralised course management systems. Instead, students were provided with an opportunity to explore new configurations of networked instruments such as personal weblogs, wikis, social bookmarking services, and so forth, for supporting their studies (for more detailed information about the course design see [2, 3, 4, 5, 6]). Over time other teachers within the Interactive media and knowledge environments and Educational technology curriculum started to integrate aspects of this re-designed approach, such as the intentional move away from centralised systems towards the use of open, networked tools and services.

II. A CASE STUDY – ANALYSING STUDENTS’ WEBLOGS

The curricular development and re-design of courses at the Institute of Informatics have started to influence our students’ perceptions regarding their roles and responsibilities, their selection and use of mediating instruments, and their overall studying practices. The following section takes a closer look at how curriculum development and re-design of courses have created an impulse for students to further explore their instrumentation options in formal higher education settings. A small case study was conducted to analyse the content and structure of all personal weblogs authored by students who are currently enrolled in the Interactive media and knowledge environments (IMKE) study programme (n=26). Its purpose was to map the range of individual adaptations and developments of these personal weblogs and the types of content that had been authored by the students over time.

III. PRELIMINARY RESULTS AND OBSERVATIONS

Throughout the analysis of Interactive media and knowledge environments students’ weblogs the following three, main patterns of personal use emerged:

- 40% of the IMKE students use their weblogs mainly for supporting their formal study program. They predominantly organise, structure, and present content according to tasks that are issued in the context of different courses within the curriculum. Very often these weblogs feature a tag cloud or a list of categories, weblinks to various course homepages, and a blogroll with a list of study peers. While this type of personal extension and adaptation seems to be mainly driven by curricular demands and contents, it nevertheless demonstrates

that students take gradual control by integrating and organising their course work in one particular digital instrument.

- Around 40% of the students use their weblogs also for supporting a formal study programme, but in addition to course related tasks, their weblogs are complemented with personal reflections on their studies and their personal progress. Some of the students also voluntarily post tasks and reflections that are related to courses that are mediated within closed course management systems. This type of weblog use can be interpreted as an expression of students' growing awareness of their studies as a whole, how different courses relate to each other, and how to support them in a meaningful way through digital instrumentation.
- Some students (around 20%) develop a type of weblog use that is based on a much wider perspective and reaches beyond the contents and scope of their formal study programme. They offer more elaborate information about the weblog author, such as a CV; work-related reflections and musings, useful links related to hobbies and interests; RSS feeds from different sources for study and work purposes; links to their other actively used social media applications, and so forth. These weblog authors represent a more elaborated idea and vision of how work, study and personal life intertwine each other and how they perceive affordances of digital technology to create and maintain a personally meaningful and beneficial "space".

These patterns of weblog use can be interpreted as an expression of different levels of control and ownership that students have gained over this particular type of digital instrument in relation to their study practise. It must be noted here that similar patterns of use can also be observed among students of the Educational technology curriculum (n=24). However, weblog use is not observable among the students of the other, two older curricula of the institute (Management of information technology and Teacher of computer science, school ICT manager). Courses within these curricula tend to follow a more traditional instructional design and teaching approach without offering opportunities to explore personal digital instrumentation options.

IV. FURTHER STEPS AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

As these examples of weblog use among students show only a fragment of their personal learning environments, in which first signs of shifting control and ownership can be witnessed as an expression of self-direction, a more thorough analysis and interviews with these students are needed to explore their entire landscape of tools and services, their

perception of their personal learning environments and their roles and responsibilities within the boundaries of formal higher education. As students have begun to experiment with the self-controlled, digital instrumentation, particular patterns of control and responsibility, ownership, provision, and so forth, emerge [7]. It is obvious that these patterns start to compete with, contrast, and contradict the patterns that are still dominating higher education. Practicing personal digital instrumentation, students are gradually becoming practitioners "living in the digital realm" and not only with it [7]. Thus, they are gradually becoming more competent in supporting and digitally mediating their study practise, but also developing their dispositions in the area of self-direction. This requires researchers and designers to learn from what these students can actually bring into the teaching and studying practices and re-configure educational experiences accordingly.

Understanding these changes helps us to further explore the actual drivers of adoption of new practices within the wider activity system of teaching and studying, both from the students' and teachers' point of view. Knowledge from these cases can be then designed and developed into strategies to widen the practice to other curricula and institutes.

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