

Microlearning as strategic research field: An invitation to collaborate

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Trading routine labour for freedom of flexible work: The need and pressure to learn

In today's working environments individuals are constantly challenged to learn, respond to new situations and meet new demands. In industry, small and medium sized businesses as well as public administrations, new information needs to be continuously acquired.

In the past, in both agricultural as well as industrial society people had to engage in lots of repetitive work. In the emerging information society all work which is performed according to specifiable routines is being bit by bit automated. Individuals are thus set free to do work which is "more interesting", i.e. which demands flexibility and still defies machine intelligence. For this they have to learn.

The need to act flexibly and to change and improve work as well as other purposeful activities implies a continuous necessity to learn. The adage that learning has become life long is a basic truism of the information society. It is the result of the victories of human invention in automating more and more routines. While liberating people from much toil, this generates also pressures for individuals to acquire multiple skills in how to learn.

The information society is the result of humankind's success in reducing ignorance and overcoming lacks of information. As the amount of information available increases, it has become a major field of human research and endeavour to master its use and acquisition.

Flipping from scarcity into abundance: Information richness and overload

The beginning of the information society thus also marks the end of two key features of human history: the fact that information was scarce and that communication was difficult has structured all past civilisations and given shape to systems of belief, has shaped the behaviour of peoples and their social organisations and has decided over the rise and fall of empires.

Today, we are part of a social transformation in which information has become abundant and communication is global. Both are more and more instantaneous, or 7/24, as it is called in the jargon of today's markets.

The increase in the pace of performance of information and communication technologies is continuing to accelerate. At the time of this writing, the Internet is less than 15 years old as a common medium of information presentation and communication exchange, but it has irreversibly penetrated all aspects of social and economic life in all developed countries.

The flip from information scarcity into information abundance is one of the main factors making learning an integral part of everyday activities. To be confronted with new information is part of the normalcy of life today.

An alternative to mega-information and macro-learning: Taking small steps

The need to improve on learning has thus become the key to coping and taking advantage of the opportunities present society offers.

You are holding in your hands the proceedings of the first international conference “MICROLEARNING 2005” organised by the Research Studios Austria together with the University of Innsbruck. This conference was designed to deal with a quite new and maybe even alternative approach to coping with the above described phenomena and specifically with the ways of dealing with information abundance and the constant need to learn. Its basic premise is that people can learn better, more effectively and in an easier, more enjoyable manner if information is broken down into smaller units and if learning takes the shape of small steps.

Three aspects characterise this shift to microlearning:

1. The first aspect is to reduce the overflow and complexity of information and structure it into sequences and strings, into small and well linked units; this requires creating new architectures of information and makes an active engagement with the design of information necessary.
2. The second aspect is to undertake this reduction from the perspective of the person who needs to cope with big amounts of new information and who wants to learn; this requires new didactic models and makes inquiries into and redesign of learning processes necessary.
3. The third aspect is to allow individual learners to choose themselves time, place and pace of learning; this requires technology to support learners in their individual habits and needs and to offer personalised services, and it makes reducing the experience of overload, overdemand and underperformance necessary.

Microlearning thus uses continuous improvements in I&C technology performance. The constantly decreasing cost of technology increases the affordability of microlearning over all different platforms including mobiles. It assists organisations and individuals in dealing with the pressing issues of overflow of information and with the rapid pace of changes which require the absorption of new information.

The move to microlearning is also motivated by taking recent experiences with normal e-learning serious which show that individuals use available systems much less than expected. “Normal” e-learning does not seem to meet the demands of many people and organisations for continued learning. In organisations, the tracking of learning progress and the assurance of information reception quality together with consistency of understanding are also becoming increasingly critical issues.

Hard to get and difficult to manage: Creating time is critical for learning

Microlearning is also offering an answer to another of the key issues affecting learning: time. Having or making time is becoming one of the most critical elements for learning and knowledge acquisition. Managing time productively is a key success factor and qualification for individuals and organisations. The failure to “make time” for learning is one of the most common reasons why learners do not succeed to meet their own expectations and to realise the goals which they set themselves or which are set for them by the organisations they work in. “Lack of time” often results in a strong sense of frustration on the personal side and a continuous missing of targets in organisational development. The quality of an organisation as a successful learning group is the result of the individual’s ability to “create time” for learning.

Microlearning allows a different way of handling time. Instead of delaying learning, it is done in small steps which take little time. Microlearning does not require the creation of a larger “time-space”. It is enough to use the inter-spaces between different activities to take the small learning step. The power of microlearning results from the repeated use of “inter-spaces” over time. The assumption is that this allows individuals to manage their information acquisition and thus to meet their personal goals and those of the organisation they work in.

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The conference “MICROLEARNING 2005” has allowed for presentation of investigations and conclusions and open discussion of new and alternative approaches where information is not “too big” and learning materials are not “too distant”.

The Research Studios Austria want to work with scholars, researchers and practitioners who are interested in microlearning and micro-information.

We are interested in research on individual user’s specific needs, experience patterns and situational perspectives to change the top-down “delivery” of info content and learning matter. We want to exchange views and share experiences with people who design micro-content environments for learning and information acquisition that use new ways of content distribution and cooperation. We want to understand how users can immerse themselves in a “learning flow” which accompanies other activities but sustains the acquisition of information and assists in applying information in work and other social activities. We want to better understand the motivational factors of learners and how to integrate information acquisition and learning for organisations into the ongoing flow of daily activities. And we want to see if one can demonstrate significant improvements in the speed and quality of, for instance, second language acquisition or professional-technical news-retention when using a micro-learning approach.

“MICROLEARNING 2005” is a start for the Research Studios Austria to network with scholars, researchers and practitioners from around the world on all issues relating to the issues and topics mentioned above. It will be an annual event for the foreseeable future and I wish to extend an invitation to each and every reader of this publication to contribute and partake in the next and upcoming meeting.

Please respond and send us your input and suggestions, submit your papers and your research!

The website of www.microlearning.org is offered as a platform for staying in touch, exchanging research and preparing the next conference.

Thank you for your interest in collaborating!

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