

What is Microlearning and why care about it? (Introductory Note)

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Microlearning06 is a platform for looking at and discussing the impact and development of all those technologies and practices where micro-content are used, produced and circulated. The developments of computers, Internet and mobile phones in the last ten years have transformed our living, working and learning environments to such an extent that we are actually continuously engaged in microlearning.

“Microlearning” has become the most common everyday practice in the information society. It’s the way we breathe in information and exhale communication. We do it when reading and writing e-mails or mobile texts, blogs and wikis, or when we google and podcast, set up aggregations & feeds. The new I&C technologies move us rapidly in this new environment and we are learning willingly and intuitively as well as sometimes quite unwillingly and exhausted to use the technologies and integrate them into our practices. Depending on our age we have varying degrees of fun and pleasure.

“Micro-contents” are the text bits which we produce and circulate in new, loosely coupled formats and structures. They make up the new bases of eLearning, knowledge management, and information acquisition in corporate and educational environments. We no longer write long papers but design multimedia presentations, we do not exchange essays but excel sheets, we coordinate our activities and dates not with letters but SMSs.

The emerging new digital micromedia ecology delivers and calls for the design of innovative experiences, processes and technologies: personal and dynamic, casual and volatile, complex and effective.

The proceedings of this conference *Microlearning06* provide a selective view on life in the global Information Society, driven by Information and Communication Technologies.

The amount of approachable information is rapidly increasing. The working environment of the individual is rapidly changing. The same goes for the global market environment of organizations and institutions. There is no foreseeable end to this spiral. Permanent Learning is the only answer for individuals, organizations and institutions. To meet this challenge, it is indispensable making much more intensive use of the digital infrastructure which is based on PCs and Laptops, on the Web in general, and, increasingly, on many kinds of smaller networked mobile devices.

The papers in this book confront a reality where eLearning is possible for anyone any-time, anywhere, at their own pace, with their own scope.

Given this reality we have to confront the fact that there is a considerable difference between the ongoing learning with the new ICTs which is often termed as “informal” and the organized learning formalized in courses.

While the informal learning works very well, the formal is not. This observation results a series of questions: Why has formal eLearning never lived up to its promise? Why do individual “life long learners” as well as managers in “learning organisations” still have massive problems keeping people motivated and courses effective? Why is the eLearning adaption rate especially in Small & Media Enterprises still abysmally low? Why are the drop out rates in many eLearning programs and strategies terribly high? How can we profit more from the new ubiquitous learning possibilities?

For many observers and analysts formal eLearning seems to be too big and too static. Proprietary platforms, quite expensive to buy, are often not adapting to the personal needs of the users nor do they keep up with the rapid evolution of web technologies. Many contents look quite old after a short while, many platforms quite clumsy and unattractive only after a year or two. Large units of digital course material which was expensive to produce become too quickly obsolete and the rapid change of markets and knowledges outpace the installed base.

In the view of the Research Studios Austria, there is one main problem: it is macro. Macro-platforms, macro-contents and macro-learning do not succeed. Thus, we have invited people from all around the world to try out an alternative and start with a micro as a point of departure and as an end for the means of learning.

Microlearning: A New Approach

Research Studio eLearning Environments in Innsbruck has learned its own lessons with macro and not succeeded to find practicable solutions to the questions posed earlier. Thus we began to think “micro” in terms of learning, contents and architecture. We

changed our perspectives. We did not want to force learners to plug themselves in into an inflexible Learning Management System, but wanted to change the format of content and the way it is delivered to fit into the user's daily digital experience. Very small pieces, loosely joined, fed into the personal stream of communications and tasks. An additional, unobtrusive flow of "microimpulses" that may easily be ignored when the time is not right, or may nearly just as easily be answered with "microactivities".

This is also the idea behind the *Knowledge Pulse*[®] application the Studio has been developing both for web-based PCs and web-enabled mobile phones and other mobile devices. And this is the wider concept the Studio has been following in its research agenda: a better understanding of and a deeper research into the pedagogical as well as the technological implications of "micro-content" and "microlearning".

At the very same time, in the last three years, when we were taking this new direction, the world of digital information and eLearning has been changing dramatically.

The Internet went into another powerful metamorphosis, from relatively static portals and pages to meme-sized and dynamic "micro-content". At the top Google was taking over the dominating role from Microsoft in IT. And at the grassroots level a hundred flowers began to bloom: New practices (like "blogging") called for new technologies (like "feeds") and new applications ("social software") led to new experiences.

This is the state of things that has been captured by the first two Microlearning Conferences. It is a conference series on eLearning, with a heavy focus on m-learning, and knowledge management. What really makes it quite unique, in addition to the intensive and intimate workshop atmosphere, is the different "micro"-perspective that is successfully blurring borders and bringing together people from fields that hitherto have been isolated from one another: managers and pedagogues, IT developers and experts in corporate training, visionaries and practitioners.

While *Microlearning2005* has staked the claim, successfully introducing a concept connecting "microlearning" with "micro-content" and "microinformation", *Microlearning2006* has been able to concentrate on the "big picture", laying a special focus on the newest developments of the "Micro Web" (a.k.a. the "Web 2.0"), the "Semantic Web" and "eLearning 2.0". The fact that this event has been sponsored by the education/learning departments of *Intel* and *Nokia* is proof of the impact of the "micro"-idea.

These proceedings of the Microlearning2006 conference give you an impressive overview of practical and theoretical aspects of Next Generation eLearning. As you will find, from being embedded in the contextual framework of the micro-learning approach

these ideas and projects are gaining additional meaning and coherence. Additional material is archived at the conference website at www.microlearning.org, including invited presentations of keynote speakers like Stephen Downes, Thomas Vander Wal, and many more.

A New Digital Gap

Continuous Partial Attention. Personal Info-Clouds. Rapid Learning. Google Learning. Nanolearning. Personal Learning Environment. eLearning 2.0. The increasing popularity of keywords and buzzwords like these in the international eLearning discourse is proving that the *Microlearning* conference series has hit the center of problems to be faced by an “Information Society” still struggling to become a digital learning society.

But with the rise of micro-content-based web applications and technologies, we also see the opening of a different kind of Digital Gap. Our conference has shown an amazing amount of increasingly mature concepts and technologies, which in one way or another will transform workplace learning, corporate training and institutional education in the future. But there were also intensive discussions about the difficulties in integrating such innovative ideas into the daily practice of organizations, institutions, and “lifelong learners”.

For learners, organizations and for education and training providers it is not just about investing or not investing time and money in another new ICT based solutions making high but seemingly vague promises. It is an environmental change, and early adopters will be best prepared for future challenges.

To close the gap between research and development, what would be needed is some space to experiment and some time for iterative development. But education and training providers, and individual learners too, want something that works and they want it now. They got real training needs, they want something that makes their life easier. So we will have to somehow re-build the ship on sea. The modular *micro*-approach typical for the new generation of eLearning may be especially well suited for such a challenge. Next year’s conference will again go one step further ahead in exploring the impact of micro-content and microlearning in changing the environment of the majority of “digital workers” and learners. Scholars, researchers and practitioners who are interested in these important and fascinating questions are invited to contribute. Join us at www.microlearning.org, the virtual node of a network of innovation and a community of practice that will be gradually expanding.