

Micromedia & eLearning 2.0 (Introductory Note)

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At the *Microlearning2005* conference, we have sounded out new concepts, practices and technologies related to microlearning. Unlike microteaching, the exploration of the world of microlearning is still in its infancy. But a new paradigmatic understanding on micro levels of learning processes in mediated environments is emerging and being worked out.

Yesterday, some aspects of this paradigmatic understanding were presented during the workshop day of the European Academy for Microlearning¹. The pre-conference event offered valuable insights into game-based learning,² the design of micro-learning objects, and the relevance of semantic web developments for eLearning microlearning? Now, we want to invite you to explore some further aspects in the area of microlearning and related fields. This time, we have put the focus on “Micromedia & eLearning 2.0”. The reason for this is not that we have already exhausted the full potential of the microlearning discourse– and are now moving on to other micro-buzzwords. The opposite is the case. But the deeper we get into the complexities of the “micro,” the more interrelationships, connections, areas of tension and transition we find:

- *interrelationships* between cultural and technological developments (e.g. mod tools and modification cultures)
- *connections* between economic and technological developments (e.g. micro-markets in processes of glocalization)

1 Cf. <http://www.eamil.org/>

2 Cf. the contribution of Peter Krieg in this volume. The introductory note of Lynne A. Chisholm is also referring to workshop day of the European Academy for Microlearning.

- *transitions* of media and learning cultures (e.g. media generations and the interplay of media technologies, media events, genres and formats, as well as corresponding social settings and modes of reception, interaction and cognition).

Of course, there are various areas of tension. For example, if you look at learning cultures and socialisation in highly “mediatized” societies, you can observe conflicting and incoherent developments. On the one hand, we have rather traditional learning cultures and institutions on all levels of education – trying to conserve and perpetuate forms of school learning and to accommodate learning technologies to these forms. This affirms the primacy of bureaucracy, technology, administration and implies a reduction of the manifold ways of learning to special “course-types” or pedagogical designs. As a bit of a joke, one might imagine a future historian looking back one day on the early years of microlearning, and finding a representative thesis title like: “Blackboardization and closed mental institutions – a comparative discourse analysis of eLearning after the millenium”.

On the other hand, we have smart media developments – “Things that think”³ as researchers at the M.I.T. Media Lab would say – and we have a variety of informal developments and new cultures emerging. Some key terms and phrases are “networked knowledge and ludic spaces,” “playful identities of new media generations” (cf. Schäffer 2003, Raessens 2006, Volkmer 2006) or “game-based educational models” as discussed in the education arcade.⁴

What we have is a new “simultaneity of the non-simultaneous” (Jürgen Habermas) in the field of media education, media culture as well as in technology and economics. For example, teachers as members of certain media generations are teaching pupils and students who are members of completely different media generations. Personnel directors of enterprises who have been educated with print media have to deal with multimedia, mobile learning, and cross-over media dynamics today, and so on and so forth. In this complex situation, converging and diverging processes and new trends have emerged and it becomes apparent that some of them can be bundled in terms of micromedia and eLearning 2.0.

3 Cf. <http://tmt.media.mit.edu/> (accessed Oct, 2006)

4 Cf. <http://www.educationarcade.org/> (accessed Oct, 2006)

Well, those of you who have read the essay of Stephen Downes (2005) and who also heard Norm Friesen's summary⁵ of the pre-conference workshops may come to the conclusion that we will have to focus on eLearning 2.1 now.

Let us put aside the discussions about continental or British versions of eLearning 2.*zero* versus US versions of eLearning 2.*oh* for the moment and look at the term 'eLearning 2.0' more basically. I am sceptical about these kinds of terms. A term like 'eLearning 2.0' suggests that it makes sense to describe "releases" in the domain of learning as is done in programming. It suggests that we can have such finite and well-defined "progress" in the world of learning, too. Here I have my doubts. Perhaps we can understand such descriptions better if we think of them as loving gestures towards new gadgets, as techno-fetishistic expressions, or as an attempt to play the funding game to finance projects in a similar manner as IT departments do it.

How about possible meanings of eLearning 2.0? Some say it is synonymous with microlearning. Others say that eLearning 2.0 is just eLearning on the semantic web. But we have at least to distinguish between visions and concrete options for today's learners and institutions. Looking at the slogan "Making Semantic Web *real*" of the Digital Enterprise Research Institute (DERI)⁶ and its specific project goals, we can easily see that the potential of the next generation of computing has yet to be fully realized. Otherwise, we are left with claims of eLearning 2.0 referring to technologies already available such as the use of XML instead of HTML, Resource Description Framework (RDF), process ontologies, Radio Frequency Identification (RDIF) technologies, dynamic web-sites, P2P technologies, blogs, podcasts, e-portfolio software or social software in general. Some of these existing possibilities are referred to as structured content, explicit labelling, and user generated multimedia content, or as learner-centred designs, the decentralized organization of learning, as networked knowledge organization, to social networks, or to interactive web use in general. It seems that those who earlier defined eLearning platforms as software and not primarily as social spaces now tend to more technocentric viewpoints again. On the other hand, much of the current discourse about eLearning 2.0 can be characterized in terms of foregrounding learning issues in relation to technological issues. It looks as if a new awareness may be arising with respect to forms of knowledge, pedagogical needs, pedagogical topics and their eigenvalue.

5 Cf. <http://learningspaces.org/n/papers/eamil.ppt> (accessed Oct, 2006)

6 Cf. <http://www.deri.org>, <http://www.deri.at/about/mission/> (accessed Oct, 2006)

Obviously, along with that quite a few wheels are being reinvented, and some eLearning specialists remind me of groups of neuro-psychologists affirming the most platitudinous pedagogical truisms, only now with the latest neuro-physiological data.

And what of micromedia? As far as I can see, much of the initial discourse is focussing on microcontent and “atomized” media environments. This is plausible insofar as in highly-mediatized societies we can observe increasing circulation of instant knowledge (Hug & Perger 2003), fragmented media offerings (e.g. in the context of cyberjournalism, infomediaries, weblogs, music file sharing services) and information streams increasingly intermediated by computational entities positioned more-or-less arbitrarily along them. But all of this appears foreshortened if we think of microcontent or micro-media simply as “small” media offerings, minimized media supply, “smart media,” or small apparatuses or screen sizes. Both the micro and the media have to be considered carefully. In fact, this situation is quite similar to the microlearning discussion that immediately preceded it. Depending on frames and domains of reference, measures of micro, meso and macro vary. They are relational concepts. So, with respect to learning, it may refer to building up and organizing knowledge, changing behaviour, attitudes, values, mental abilities, cognitive structures, emotional reactions, action patterns or social orders. In all cases we have the chance to consider micro, meso and macro dimensions of various views on more or less sustainable changes. Needless to say, we are excited about the approach we are developing in Innsbruck and we think the concept of Integrated Microlearning[®] (IML)⁷ as one of the most promising concepts in the field of microlearning.

The argument of the relational character of micro, meso and macro aspects also applies to the micromedia discourse. Of course, we have to distinguish clearly between media concepts, too. Apart from perceptual media such as space and time and other philosophical media concepts, we can distinguish at least between (1) technologies of production, storage and distribution, (2) semiotic instruments of communication (picture, image, language, writing, music), (3) media offerings arising through the use of communication media (texts, websites, programs, etc.) and (4) media organizations, media institutions and intermediated institutions. In addition to that we have to deal with symbolically generalized communication media (e.g. acceptance, power, love, money) *sensu* Niklas Luhmann (1997: 316f). The micromedia discourse focuses on micro levels of selected media concepts or processes of (re)mediation and medialization as well

7 Cf. <http://ele.researchstudio.at/>, <http://www.knowledgepulse.com>, <http://www.microlearning.org>

as (if less frequently) on complex interplays between symbolical, technological and societal formations. Thereby, questions of formability, adaptability, granularity, interactivity, individual use and joint practice just are as important as questions of the emergence of patterns and structures and questions of the aggregation, recombination and (re-)contextualization of parts, pieces, fragments, and facets.

The *Microlearning2006* conference and its proceedings progress our understanding of these complex issues. One of the most striking aspects of the discussions is the fact that dynamics of centre and periphery, that give-and-take between the margins and seemingly stable institutions seem open to new developments – these dynamics seem to be leading to unexpected processes and results. If I look at the resistance of many educational institutions to reform during the last decades, there appears to be some new hope for fruitful change.

Last but not least, I have to say “thanks” for contributing to the success of the conference and the proceedings. The *Microlearning2006* conference, the pre-conference workshops and also the proceedings are the fruits of many people working together.

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