Introduction

E-learning, especially since the emergence of Web 2.0 (O’Reilly, 2005), has been enhanced by different social networking tools able to support the construction of a shared and collaborative knowledge, that is a critical factor of success in a context of reticular and distributed relations (Downes, 2005; Siemens, 2006; Giovannella, et al., 2008). Social software applications are valuable within formal learning models and some of those tools might be already used quite extensively (Anderson, 2006). At the same time, a significant number of students are currently using various online social networks outside the institution.

Bearing in mind these factors, a deeper study to investigate an approach to implement a personal knowledge space in the formal context might be conducted. Basing on learner’s personal profile, the system would automatically identify relevant resources coming from the external spaces - informal and social – and then provide those resources to the learner to support explorative learning, anywhere. In a developmental perspective, the most interesting work might be the use of ubiquitous computing and social software for supporting work based learning and informal learning outside traditional courses. A model architecture in which social network modeling is used to formalize social knowledge in the context of formal learning might be defined.

The pedagogical framework of this investigation is inspired on socio-constructivist learning theory (Vygotskij, 1978) and meaningful learning (Ausbubel, 1968). Learning is considered as a social practice, knowledge is integrated and distributed. The concept of community is central. Learning is an act of membership to the community and the involvement is tied to the possibility of giving contributes to the development of the community itself. Other main theoretical references are networked learning (Blackall, 2005), connectivism (Siemens, 2005) and situationism (Brown & Campione, 1996). Such as pedagogical approaches could allow to experiment different pedagogic strategies and instructional design models aiming to support learners not only in the learning process, but also in the communication process with the world outside the classroom.

In such a scenario, some critical issues might arise, mainly related to interaction (interoperability, content, people) and to control and trust (identity). How to extract meaningful (micro)contents from the informal and social spaces preventing the loss of contextual information? How to control the interaction among learners, services and resources? How to avoid information overload and cognitive surplus (Sharky, 2008)? In fact, within a conventional institutional setting, to indistinctly adopt a social networking approach could produce more problems than benefits. Social technologies, such as collaborative filtering, recommendation system and online content syndication, could be adopted to implement a personal learner’s space, able to support controlled social interaction among learners and to organize and retrieve information within specific pedagogical models in the context of formal learning.

Social spaces and learning spaces

A social space is defined as the network of social relationships among the group members embedded in group structures of norms and values, rules and roles, beliefs and ideals (Kreijns, Kirschner, Jochems, & van Buuren, 2007). A social space is able to promote positive feelings and a positive social climate/online-atmosphere among learners. It means that a social space can facilitate social interaction. Social interaction can help learners sharing understanding, developing critical thinking, constructing knowledge and acquiring competences (Kreijns, et al., 2007). There are many famous social platforms, such as MySpace, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, for different means. These social platforms can be also employed for learning purposes. Learners can share learning materials and discuss learning issues via such social platforms. Social platforms can be divided into two types, closed/private or open/public. Everyone can access the resources from the open/public social platforms. However, people need the agreement of the owners to access the resources from the open social platforms.