Social Media and e-learning: Linking usage habits of Social Media Tools and the effectiveness of e-learning in China and Germany

1. Introduction

In recent years collaboration enhanced by the rise of the social web increasingly influenced our daily life. The Internet and digital messaging technologies lead also to changing practices in learning. The world of interactive media has changed the students' learning styles as well as their expectations towards learning. "This net-centric generation values their ability to use the Web to create a self-paced, customized, on-demand learning path that includes multiple forms of interactive, social and self-publishing media tools." (Baird & Fisher, 2005: 5) Consequently, thanks to social network technologies, learners are more and more capable of forming learning communities to share their knowledge (Baird & Fisher 2005). But, the impact of social media usage habits on the effectiveness of e-learning platforms has not been examined yet especially in the light of cultural differences.

In this paper, we will take a glance at current social media developments in China and the influences of these tendencies on the success of e-learning. To compare, we contrast our observation with social media usage habits and e-learning in Germany. The foundation of the Carl Benz Academy – the Executive MBA-programme of Mercedes Benz China Limited – and its blended learning approach will serve as an example of high relevance. The aim is to provide information on the linkage between social media usage habits on the success of e-learning platforms.

2. Background

2.1 Online social networks and e-learning in China

The rising influence of social networks is not limited to Western countries like the U.S.A. and Germany. Online activities such as sharing information and exchanging mindsets in online forums, (micro-)blogs and social networking platforms are more and more common in China. "In China, online social networks have become a major platform for the youth to gather information and to make friends with like-minded individuals." (Yu, Asur & Huberman, 2011: 1) In order to get a clearer view of the Chinese social media landscape it is vital to take a closer look at the key user groups of social networks and the information they share.

In June 2010 the Information Office of the State Council of the People's Republic of China stated that "the new applications and services of the Internet have provided a broader scope for people to express their opinions." According to a study conducted by Yu, Asur and Huberman the majority of social media users in China share content that already exists such as videos and images initially published by other users. By contrast users in Western countries tend to spread their own ideas and news with help of the social web. Compared to "netizens" in China they are using social media in a more collaborative way. Regarding this fact Chinese users act in a very passive way. Some reasons for this different behaviour can be found in their culture which is also revealed in their way of learning. Traditionally Chinese practices of learning include "demonstration, modelling, tracing, repeated copying and ultimately active

memorisation [...] [which emphasizes the] idea that being creative or artistic can only happen later after precise mastery of basic forms." (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006: 9).

The differences of learning cultures in Western countries compared to China are remarkable. Classes in China are very teacher-centered and Chinese learners repeat sentences and texts not only aloud, but also alone. Whereas Chinese students learn by reading independently and in a certain way of self-study, learners in Western countries are used to learn from friends and classmates through discussions in groups. Therefore students learn through talking not reading. (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006) "To have a chance of success, LM [Learning Management] and KM [Knowledge Management] approaches need to recognise the social aspect of learning and knowledge [...] to leverage, create, sustain and share knowledge in a collaborative way, through participation, dialogue, discussion, observation and imitation." (Chatti, Jarke & Frosch-Wilke, 2007: 412) According to Babcock (2004) trust and a culture that encourages knowledge sharing are two essential requirements for the success of learning communities. (Chatti, Jarke & Frosch-Wilke, 2007) This collaborative spirit is about to be enforced in China in the upcoming years thanks to e-learning and international educational projects.

2.2 The need for e-learning in China

In China practices in learning are changing for various reasons. China, which has the world's largest educational system, adopts a blended learning strategy in order to cope with a growing demand for education and shortages of teaching staff.

Regarding this fact Friesner and Hart (2004) point out three main reasons why China will boost the implementation of online learning in their educational system. First of all the growing number of companies leads to an increasing need of part-time study programmes. Secondly the creation of new cities and consequently new jobs require further education. Finally learning is a way to overcome the bimodal distribution of wealth in China.

Since "China's demand for postsecondary education is considerable, and the country currently cannot keep pace with the compelling need" (Robinson 2009) companies are already running their own education programme in order to bridge the knowledge gap. The Carl Benz Academy is one example for the measures taken by Chinese companies to foster further education. Within this international project a virtual learning environment (VLE) was set up. Raaij and Schepers (2008) define a VLE as "web-based communications platform, that allows students, without limitation of time and place to access different learning tools, such as program information, course content, teacher assistance, discussion boards, document sharing systems, and learning resources." (van Raaij & Schepers, 2008: 839) This e-learning system...

2.3 Foundation of the Carl Benz Academy

In 2011 Mercedes Benz China Limited and their dealerships launched an executive MBA programme in collaboration with Peking University, Berlin University for Professional Studies and L.A.'s Woodbury University. This example shows how a Chinese company can benefit in an international partnership from the e-learning experience of foreign educational systems. In this case Carl Benz Academy-founders are currently applying the blended learning approach of a German university for professional development to a Chinese Executive MBA-programme. Within this project the partners set up a collaborative online platform to foster exchange, innovation, shared purpose and learning by individuals and groups in a synchronous as well as an asynchronous way.

Besides all opportunities of e-learning the Carl Benz Academy (CBA) recognized several obstacles which occurred while teaching the first students online.

This paper analyses the reasons for these problems. We maintain that besides cultural differences, communication problems and different experience with e-learning, usage habits of social media determine significantly the effectiveness of e-learning.

3. Methodology and findings

In order to clarify if an appropriate usage habit of social media in various countries is a crucial factor for the success of e-learning platforms, we will conduct a survey among 30 Chinese and 30 German students using an identically constructed platform.

The fact that the CBA used the experience of the Berlin University for Professional Studies to build up a virtual learning environment (VLE) is a very unique opportunity to examine how students from different cultures perceive the same e-learning platform. These circumstances enable us to scrutinize the learning success of students with different cultural backgrounds. Since these students stay in their own cultural learning communities and are not interacting with each other the findings should be extremely relevant.

First of all we will conduct a survey among the two learning groups in order to identify social media usage habits. Secondly we are going to measure the learning success of both groups comparing the results of the first online units. Finally we will analyze if the different user habits have influence on the success our e-learning platform.

As an example, recent studies show that "there are vast differences between the content that is shared on Sina Weibo [a Chinese social media platform] when compared to Twitter [one of the biggest social media platforms in Western Countries]". (Yu, Asur & Huberman, 2011: 1)

We assume that communicational behaviour and interaction between community members on e-Learning platforms could be compared to the way the same people communicate in social networks where common interests, news and other information are shared.

In order to provide recommendations regarding the construction of VLEs we will examine if e-learning platforms in China should follow the rules of Chinese social media platforms.

Conclusion and future work

As future work, we plan to discover crucial factors that determine the success of e-learning platforms in China.

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