Introduction to Social Media & Learning Minitrack

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This minitrack presents research that addresses leading edge use of technology, research methods and system design to analyze and support learning through social media. The papers further research in the fields of networked learning and collaborative learning and explore how social media can be used to design for learning in various contexts and present new research findings on intercultural learning and social interaction, instruction and task design, knowledge construction in online communities and online participation.

The openness and accessibility that characterizes social media in terms of participation, transparent dialogues and co-creation erodes traditional boundaries and blends forms of formal, non-formal and informal learning. The ability to participate in (global) social networks and communities and the impact on co-creation and learning are ongoing issues for social media and learning research. The papers in this minitrack highlight various contemporary research trends associated with the capture, analysis and novel applications of social media today. The papers develop or test methods for analyzing social participation and learning, address automated data collection and analysis in support of social and learning analytics, explore student and professional learning and knowledge creation. It is interesting to note that the papers, perhaps as a reflection of today’s debate on the place and use of social media in education and learning, present various examples of making use of social media systems for learning. Whether it concerns Facebook or discussion forums, they all seek to understand how they can facilitate learning.

We open our minitrack with a paper on ‘Measuring intercultural competence in computer-mediated intercultural exchange’ presented by Chuang and Suthers. Social media platforms, such as Facebook, easily connect us to others across the globe, creating more opportunities for intercultural interaction and possible intercultural misunderstandings. This paper examines the influence of the task, language, and medium on conducting intercultural exchanges and measuring intercultural communication competence on a social media platform. The findings indicate that the type of task and language in relation to the affordances of the social platform significantly influences how intercultural communication competence is measured and ultimately participation in the intercultural exchange.

The next study by Eryilmaz, Thoms, Mary, Kim and Canelon looks at ‘Task oriented reading of instructional materials and its relationship to message scores in online learning conversations’. Their paper examines unobtrusive attention guidance integrated into an anchored discussion system. Their study aims to promote students’ task oriented reading of central domain principles from instructional materials, and to support students’ progressive improvement of tentative ideas focusing on central domain principles from instructional materials. Results show that attention guidance prompted students to reflect on and monitor their cognitive processes while reading information they deemed important. Moreover, we found that students made deliberate efforts to improve ideas by focusing on information they deemed important.

Kent and Rafaeli present a paper on ‘How interactive is a semantic network? Concept maps and discourse in knowledge communities’. They argue that interactivity is a central construct for collaborative knowledge creation in online communities. They propose a semantic network topology to online discussions, which in turn reflects a social constructivist process. The paper describes a field study comparing interactivity using threaded-based discussion and Ligilo (a semantic, networked based discussion tool). Initial results indicate higher interactivity in content creation patterns, suggesting improved learning, motivation and sustainability for discussion and community. The final paper by Waizenegger, Remus and Maier is on ‘The social media trap: how knowledge workers learn to deal with constant social connectivity’. Constant social connectivity is a two-edged sword bringing about positive and negative effects. Knowledge workers have to learn how to deal with constant social connectivity. Based on an exploratory case study they found that knowledge workers develop coping strategies to deal with the negative effects of social media use. The results indicate the triggers of learning and that knowledge workers acquire and internalize connectivity skills by direct experience, modeling and self-control.