PARALLEL SPACES?
How Students use social network sites to organize learning in the context of university courses

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OVERVIEW

1. Starting point and context
2. Theoretical background
3. Methodology
4. Results
5. Outlook
STARTING POINT

Little usage of communication and collaboration tools in LMS of university courses

: compensatory use (closed groups) of Social Network Sites?

Closed groups as informal spaces for learning, collaboration and cooperation, which exist parallel to university courses and beyond control of teaching staff?
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- How do students use social media in the context of university?
- How do social network sites (SNS) go along with university courses?
- How do university students use closed groups of social network sites (SNS) to organize learning processes connected to university courses?

Focus on students’ perspective

*NOT*: How to use/implement SNS as a teaching tool!
THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

- “Personal Learning Environment” (Attwell 2007)
- “Communities of Practice” (Wenger 2009)
- “Online Learning Environments” (Meder / Iske 2009)
METHODOLOGY

- Problem-centered interview (Witzel, 2000)
- Request for participation:
  Facebook, university courses
  - Cologne: 7 interviews (3 male, 4 female; disciplines: special education, music, economic sciences, intermedia)
  - Frankfurt: 7 interviews (2 male, 5 female; disciplines: educational sciences, economic sciences)
- Analysis: theory-driven
METHODOLOGY: Interview Guideline

1. Opening question
   “In the context of their university courses students often use the internet. How do you use the internet for the university? Please tell me...”

2. Questions generating narrative,
   e.g. “Please remember: Have your usage of Social Network Sites, especially of groups, changed during the last years? If yes: How?”

3. Questions generating understanding
   referring to narrative (1.2)

4. Socio-demographic data
RESULTS (1)

- Facebook as a de-facto standard among students,
- preferred instead of learning management systems: “they go there as soon as they start studying, otherwise they are left out somehow…“
- Different types of groups of SNS in university context: (university in general, general BA/MA-programme, cohorts of BA/MA-programme, individual courses, ...)
- Diversity of tools and practices
RESULTS (1 - example)

“And why do people use Facebook instead of Ilias, what would you say?”

“I personally think, that these university platforms are often confusing ... And yes, I think you can discuss more detailed questions easier with your fellow students than with the general roundup on Ilias.”

(18 years old male student of Intermedia)
How do university students use closed groups of social network sites (SNS) to organize learning processes connected to university courses?

- Exchange of experiences, pieces of advice, hints, suggestions
- Questions referring to qualifications, free places in courses, exchange of places
- Practical training, jobs, registration for courses and exams
- Organization of working groups
RESULTS (3)

- (closed groups of ) SNS: **no replacement for / shift of** subject matter related communication and cooperation...
  - *Little/no debate on* learning content, but exchange of organisation information
  - Learning process (debate on content) rarely take place in SNS-groups
RESULTS  (3 - example)

“It’s a kind of a question and answer-game. You get information about your exams, specific topics of your courses, ...

(24 years old male student of special education)

“The purpose of these groups is exchange. Someone posts a question, then there is a discussion, I mean, everybody posts his or her answer and that’s it. The main things are appointments, deadlines and when and where to meet.”

(25 years old female student of special education)
RESULTS (4)

- (closed groups of) SNS relation to learning is **not self-evident, not obvious**
  - SNS are rarely associated with „learning“ in formal contexts, rather SNS are associated with leisure time / recreation
  - Clark et al. (2009): „Digital Dissonance“
  - Students: critical view on question whether SNS should be integrated into formal university as a learning tool
RESULTS (4 - example)

“Somehow it’s a *private* platform you use in your free time and not where you can exchange job related opinions or experiences, because no *job-related* conversations take place here either. *Somehow that doesn’t go together.*”

*(24 years old female student of business administration)*
RESULTS (5)

- Little discussion about **judgements or criteria**: “fair exam”, “good examinant”, “easy exam”, “capable lecturer”,

  → Often **exchange of positions, without discussions**!
  For example controversy, is XY a good lecturer?
  Criteria for judgement?

- **Periodical usage**: periodical usage/frequency/intensity:
  at the beginning / at the end of the term → organisation
RESULTS (6)

• General ambivalence
  - All interviewees use (closed) groups of SNS,
    But: criticise Facebook (privacy protection, business model)
  - Justify or rationalise own usage...
    ...not important... no really private information... no intensive use...
    “I only use it because my fellow students use it ...”
OUTLOOK

Function of SNS in university context:

- “Social glue” (Madge et. al., 2009)
- “identity politics' of being a student” (Selwyn, 2009)

„[...] Facebook has become an important site for the informal, cultural learning of 'being' a student, with online interactions and experiences allowing roles to be learnt, values understood and identities shaped.“

(Selwyn 2009, 171)
OUTLOOK

- Expand understanding from *learning-related* to *educated-related* use of SNS (Selwyn 2009)
  - Recounting and reflecting on university experience
  - Exchange of practical information
  - Exchange of academic requirements of courses
  - Displays of supplication, disengagement and/or moral support
  - 'Banter' (i.e. exchange of humour and nonsense)

→ Extend interview guideline / perspective
OUTLOOK

• Increase **number of cases**
• Analysis of **systematic differences** in relation to
  - Faculties (humanities versus natural sciences)
  - Examination regulations
  - Undergraduates (BA) / graduate students (MA)
  - Size and composition of (closed-) group

• **Scalability** of results (→ quantitative online questionnaire)
REFERENCES I/II

- Madge, Clare u.a. (2014). Facebook, social integration and informal learning at university: ‘It is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work’. Learning, Media and Technology, 34 (2), 141-155.
REFERENCES II/II

Thank you...

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