

ELT and Social Media: Using **Whatsapp** as a Virtual Learning Environment



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Keywords

- EFL/ESL = English as Foreign/Second Language
- TELL = Technology Enhanced Language Learning
- MALL = Mobile Assisted Language Learning
- LMS = Learning Management System
- VLE = Virtual Learning Environment
- SNS = Social Networking Sites
- NBLT = Network Based Language Teaching

Key Points of the Presentation

- Formal vs Informal Learning
- Virtual Learning Environments
- SNS and ELT
- Whatsapp as a VLE
- Students and Teachers in chat
- Advantages and Disadvantages
- SNS in Higher Education

FORMAL VS INFORMAL LEARNING

Formal Learning

- Occurs in official settings (school, college, university)
- Part of a defined curriculum
- Planned structure, schedule, objectives and expected outcome
- Subject to formal assessment/evaluation

Informal Learning

- No dedicated setting
- No defined content, timing, instructions
- No set objectives or outcome
- Not intentional from the learner's perspective
- Learning by experience, includes language building, socialization and play

DESCRIBING VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Virtual Learning Environments

- **Formal:** static and structured, with lessons and practice/assessment sections. Online tutoring and chat/forum as extra features. Often mandatory.
- **Semi formal:** provide both structured parts or courses and extra resources/activities chosen autonomously by the user.
- **Informal:** No predetermined path, users participate in the VLE according to their preferences.

Classification of VLE

- J. Park (2011) classifies mobile learning applications confronting two factors:
 - 1) HIGH vs LOW Transactional Distance (Moore, 1993)
 - 2) INDIVIDUALIZED VS SOCIALIZED learning activity

SNS can be considered LowTD/Socialized VLEs

SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

Integrating SNS in class courses

- G. Mallia (The Social Classroom, 2014) posits 4 ways of integrating SNS:
- INTEGRATED
- APPENDED
- SUPPORTIVE
- RANDOM

The difference lies mainly in the degree of involvement in the course structure

4 ways of Integrating SNS

- **INTEGRATED:** teacher imparts instructions on SN use; SN pages explicitly part of the designed course.
- **APPENDED:** SN pages as continuation/reinforcement of class work. Participation expected, not mandatory.
- **SUPPORTIVE:** participation encouraged, not expected; incidental nature, in line with common usage of SN; likely to be accepted by SS
- **RANDOM:** completely incidental reference to the course. Mainly used for class management, incidence difficult to map.

Social Network Users

- “the very nature of most social networks is informal (...) social networks are used because users want to, rather than because they have to”

(Mallia, The Social Classroom, 2014, Preface)

- “ (...) three main dimensions motivate the choice of joining a social network: the information dimension, the friendship dimension and the connection dimension”

(Bonds – Raacke & Raacke, 2011)

WHATSAPP AS A VIRTUAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

The study

- Creation of class group chat in English (4 groups)
- Students' age from 16 to 20
- Mixed level, ranging between A1 and B1
- Duration: from 1 month to 3 years

Key aspects of Whatsapp as a VLE

- The most popular instant messaging app
- Class Management Tool (notices, assignments, reminders, materials)
- Communication-oriented
- Favors acquisition rather than learning (Krashen 1982 – Input Hypothesis);
- Informal, relaxed, anxiety-free (no requirements or expectations)

Whatsapp features

- Receive and send text messages
- View members' status and profile pic
- Share media content (documents/ images/ videos / music / links)
- Use emoji and symbols in writing
- Record and receive audio messages



Extra supporting tools

- T9
- Text prediction
- Spellchecker
- Easy to integrate with extra apps and tools (online dictionaries, pronunciation check)
- Internet search

**STUDENTS AND TEACHERS
IN A GROUP CHAT:
OBSERVED BEHAVIOURS
AND ROLES**

Language and interaction

Whatsapp is suitable for beginners because:

- Members normally exchange SHORT messages
- Basic language, roughly tuned
- Real communicational needs (sharing info, making appointments, small talk, class management)

Students

- **INPUT RECEIVERS/PRODUCERS** – silence admitted until they feel ready
- **IMITATE** input produced by teacher or peers
- **ATTEMPT** to communicate
- **CREATE CONTENT** by sharing materials
- **REQUIRE FEEDBACK** from teacher or peers

Teacher

- INPUT PROVIDER/TUNER
- FEEDBACK PROVIDER (when required)
- FACILITATOR – provides scaffolding
- SILENT MONITOR – observer
- (Gentle) PROMPTER
- ADMINISTRATOR – establishes rules

Dealing with errors in a group chat

- Self Correction - *oops
- Peer Correction
- Teacher's feedback

WHATSAPP AS A VLE: ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Advantages

- Turn mobile phones from source of distraction into learning tools
- Expand class time and exposure to L2
- Support class management
- Increase students' motivation and confidence

Familiarity with the medium

- Agarwall (2011) “Ease of use and intuitive interfaces of Social Media technologies (...) require zero to minimal training for learners (...) most individuals are already using the social media, and this makes blending them with a learning environment simple and rational”

Knowledge co-construction

- “Real-time chat and data sharing applications support communication, collaboration and knowledge construction.” (Koole, 2009, p. 26)
- Structures of learning are built (...) also by collective learners; dialogue is formed (...) among the learners themselves. (Benson & Samarawickrema , 2009)

Relevance for Students

- Students are key actors of the learning process, feel important and trusted. (Humanistic Education, Rogers 1969)
- Meaningful interaction
- Builds identity and sense of belonging to a community
- Promotes cooperation and communication among SS
- Relatively low level of self disclosure

Disadvantages

- Impact on learning difficult to estimate or assess
- Didactic misbehaviour (OT, overuse of L1)
- Social misbehaviour (quarrels, bullying, abusive language)
- Privacy issues (intrusiveness, obsessive chatting, stalking)
- Indefinite amount of extra work

Precautions

- Establishing a group *netiquette*
- Being discreet and alert at the same time
- Using a dedicated phone number/device
- Silencing group chats
- Shutting down the phone when necessary

SOCIAL NETWORK SITES AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Using SNS in Higher Education?

- “Academics’ participation in SNS (...) blend social grooming, identity building, networking and assistance provision-request” (Veletsianos, Aspioti and Aspiotis, 2010)
- Informal learning experiences “present alternative means of engaging students in academic content without the time constraint of the formal curriculum” (Bull, Thompson and Searson, 2008, p 126)

(In)formal Learning at Unical:

- The English Corner (tutoring for students of Engineering, 2009)
- Self Study Activities (Multimedia Language Lab)
- CLAC Project -Language Courses for International Certifications (Students, PhDs, School Teachers, 2009 -2013)
- Conversando (2014/2015) (Conversation Classes held by International Students at Unical)

CONCLUSIONS

Final Remarks

- Implementing informal learning within formal learning contexts enhances students' motivation and can improve performance
- SNS are particularly suitable VLEs to be used as a continuation of class activities
- Whatsapp as a VLE offers a number of advantages (ease of use, basic interaction, integrating skills, extra tools)
- Some precautions must be taken by the teacher, particularly concerning privacy issues
- Informal VLEs such as SNS can be implemented effectively in Higher Education contexts



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