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Realizing McLuhan's Dream in the 21st Century Classroom

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Abstract. This paper attempts to pay tribute to Marshall McLuhan while describing an action research project that tries to answer the question: how can we educate the new generation of journalists by exploring innovative learning experiences based on social contexts mediated by technology? The project has followed three cycles: one based on Moodle, a popular learning management system; another based on Dolphin, a platform for the creation of social networks; and a final one based on a collective blog whose posts are indexed and discussed on Facebook. The description of the flow of the project through the three cycles is developed resorting to McLuhan's tetrad of media effects. The analysis of the collected data reveals increased motivation and participation of the students in the learning experience, closer connection to the reality of the profession, and improvement of the students' personal skills in the area of journalism.

Keywords: empowerment, journalism, McLuhan, social networks, tetrad of media effects.

1 Introduction

This paper is an attempt to pay tribute to Marshall McLuhan by evoking some of his contributions in the context of a research project we have been developing over the last five years to answer the question "How can we educate the new generation of journalists by exploring innovative learning experiences based on social contexts mediated by technology?"

We would like to believe that this project represents, to some extent, a realization, in the classroom, of McLuhan's dream of the 'Global Village'[1]. The project also attempts to pay tribute to the pairing between classroom and city suggested by McLuhan and his co-authors in 'City as Classroom' [2], as well as to McLuhan's vision, reported in 'Understanding Me'[3], that we are "approaching the age when we shall program the environment instead of the curriculum."

The subjects of our research are the students of Media Studies of the College of Education where we teach. Our main concerns, as teachers, are to improve the skills of the students as future journalists, develop their consciousness about the quality of the journalistic product, and get them acquainted with the concept of cyberculture. The activities of our research project started five years ago, based on learning management system Moodle, that we used with our students to maintain

communication and share contents. Over the years Moodle became outdated, revealing less and less adequacy to the expectations and needs of the students and requiring more versatility. This was the starting point that motivated us to test a learning experience eminently based on a social platform called Boonex Dolphin. Based on this platform, we created a space for the students to publish their academic works in the journalism area, experiencing the freedom and responsibility of content creation. Now, the research project has moved to a simple blog, with indexed publications in a group gathering in Facebook.

This evolution from Moodle to Facebook can be likened with the evolution from a traditional classroom environment to a city environment, with the city representing community, openness, complexity, connectivity, growth, negotiation, creativity, and innovation, attributes that we can hardly find in a traditional classroom. It is in this sense that we feel inspired by the metaphorical pairing between classroom and city suggested by McLuhan and his co-authors in 'City as Classroom: Understanding Language and Media' [2].

In the following sections we start by contextualizing our project within the current trends about the education of journalists, which we link to the thought of McLuhan. In the next section, we explain our adoption of an action research approach and describe the three cycles we have adopted. The following section is devoted to the analysis of the results of the second cycle, for which the empirical work is now completed. The final section describes the flow of the project through the three cycles by resorting to McLuhan's concept of "tetrad of media effects", as described in the 'Laws of Media' [4] and 'The Global Village' [5]. We conclude with a few final considerations.

2 Educating journalists for a socially networked world

As proposed by [Mensing](#) [6], the debate about the future of journalism education can be categorized today in two main streams: the industry-centered and the community-centered streams. Industry-centered journalism sees journalism as an industrial process of transmitting information from producer to consumer, carried out by professional journalists whose role is to find information, shape it into accurate stories and transmit it as quickly as possible to mass audiences via mass media [4]. Although the majority of present day graduates do not expect to act professionally within this model, which the evolution of the media has made obsolete, its tradition still inspires the imagination of many students and the mainstream strategies of most schools.

The alternative model, defended by [Mensing](#) [6], following the pioneering visions of [Dewey](#) [7] and [Carey](#) [8], argues in favor of community vision that takes journalism back to its democratic roots, while getting the best out of the new forms of creating, producing and distributing news. This turns the journalist into a reporter, editor, and facilitator within a community and makes the journalist part of a network of relationships [6]. An education that shares this vision recognizes that producing journalism within a network is different from producing it industrially and that the students should learn to collaborate with interested members of the community and develop skills, such as community facilitation and moderation, to enable them to take advantage of these differences [6].

These proposals have evolved, to a large extent, from the concept of citizen journalism, which became popular in the nineties [9,10]. Today, within the alliance between journalism and social networks, this concept is re-emerging with increased strength towards what Jarvis [9] described as "networked journalism", an expression later made popular by Beckett in his 'Supermedia: Saving Journalism so it can Save the World' [10]. Networked journalism does, indeed, emphasize the collaborative nature of a variety of journalism that engages professionals and amateurs alike and recognizes the complex relationships that lead to the news: a variety of journalism that stresses the process more than the product and where the more journalists behave like citizens the stronger their journalism becomes [9].

The importance of the work of Marshall McLuhan in this context is that he has foreseen many years in advance this new world, where a new variety of journalism is needed, and has contributed to its understanding. In fact, if we recall the utopia of the Big Community proposed by John Dewey in 'The Public and Its Problems' [5], we can say that McLuhan's Global Village is Dewey's Big Community extended worldwide and strengthened by the power of electronic interdependence [1].

The emergence of technological change in the latest years is bringing new challenges for Journalism. Enterprises in the area of the media are struggling to adjust their business models [11,12], while the students who will be the journalists of the future need extra skills to survive through the professionalization process. This debate about the set of necessary competences a journalist needs still persists in the literature [13,14,15].

Journalism schools are trying to cope with the emergent change, searching for the right balance between theory and practice in their curricular programs, and eventually trying to fill the gaps between academic education and the professional context [16,17]. Several authors recognize that the universities should not ignore the theoretical necessities of the employment area, so that students could easily adapt to the professional environment [18,19]. While the challenges to the professional identity of journalism are a recognized tendency that stems from the emergence of technology [20], some argue that the core features of the profession did not change that much [21]. In fact, the personal competences of readiness, efficiency in production, versatility, easy writing and communication skills are still highly valued requirements for the professionals in the media industry.

Our research project is an effort to approach these fields by putting into practice innovative learning contexts based on technologies in which the development of professional competences can be nourished. It is all about learning through practice in a community scenario, considering that the future of journalism is more than ever connected to the idea of community [22,6].

3 The virtuous cycle of action research: from Moodle to Facebook

Action research can be described as a participatory research approach emerging from an intense involvement of the significant stakeholders in solving a mutual problem from which relevant knowledge is built in close connection with the change of reality that occurs as the problem is solved. Frequently, the action research process

is illustrated as a recurring cycle of continuous improvement. This finds parallel in the area of quality management systems: a planning phase originates a set of actions. These actions, once put into practice and thoroughly observed, create data for reflection, pushing for improvement, and triggering a renovated start. The advantage of this strategy for our research problem is the empowerment of the participant students and their involvement in the collective learning process.

Our attempts at using virtual platforms to support the course started five years ago. The platform we chose was Moodle, an open-source learning management system that we used as a meeting point for content sharing and regular communication between teacher and students. As the results were encouraging, we kept experimenting with this platform for a couple of years, until we noticed that some of the students (who were now using social networks in their leisure time) were criticizing Moodle for its comparatively poor interactivity, outdated design, and lack of mechanisms for community building. Moodle represented a first cycle of action research and was the starting point of a community of journalism students. The resources in Moodle allowed extended interaction between the community elements and the accessibility to learning contents in a way that was free from the chronological constraints of a weekly meeting in the classroom.

On the other hand, in a more figurative sense, Moodle represented an opportunity to recover the importance of written communication as a personal bond to an idea. Initially, the experience was a success; however, the limitations of the communication tools in Moodle became outdated when compared to the emerging possibilities of more powerful synchronous tools, such as Windows Messenger or Skype. This, added to the less satisfactory design of Moodle and its too formal connection with the academic environment, provoked a move toward a second action research cycle that took place in a new platform.

This second cycle of the project, named “Myempowermedia”, was an opportunity to stress our additional concern with an improved empowerment of the students. For this new cycle, we have chosen Dolphin, by Boonex, a free social networking platform specifically designed to support social interaction, with features that let members create forums, chats, message boards, blogs, events, and media sharing, as well as publicize their individual portfolios and follow up easily the activity of each member inside the community. Dolphin was a promising departure from the previous experience with Moodle, and we went on using it throughout 2009/2010.

This platform created a space where the students could openly publish their academic works. Dolphin also brought user controlled tools inside the community, like blogs, forums, comments, and the freedom and responsibility of content creation, as a reminiscence of the *Agora* of ancient Greece. For the learning context, we aimed at exploring a sense of community when approaching professional experience, taking advantage of the social environment to develop advanced concerns about the quality of the journalistic product and the improvement of personal competences. In this experience, the students took the initiative to organize two competitive on-line publications, thus having to deal closely with the pressure of deadlines, the organization of the editorial direction, and the implications of positions of responsibility. The content analysis of qualitative data collected from their judgements and comments revealed the positive impacts of the project in the perceptions of the learning experience and the development of a sense of community.

4 Closing Myempowermedia: Content analysis of written reports and semi-structured interviews

The Myempowermedia project gathered a community of 123 active members at the end of the academic semester. They were invited to write and publish their evaluation of the project in a small report for the community. In the following weeks, 15 students were personally interviewed in semi-structured interviews, to enable data triangulation. Positive perceptions emerged from content analysis of the written reports that we have triangulated with the data from the interviews. Nvivo was used to code the emerging contents into tree nodes that led to the final structure described in the following concept map. The numbers in the tree nodes represent the quantity of registered content references.

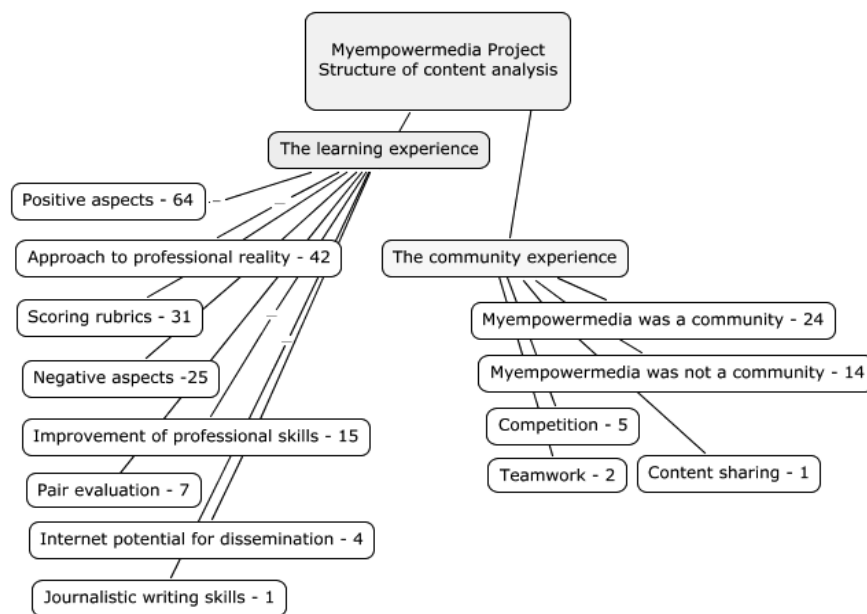


Fig. 1: Node structure of thematic content analysis

All the interviewed participants were able to signal positive aspects about the learning experience, with a clear connection to the results obtained with the analysis of the reports published by the students. Among the 64 references obtained, the participants emphasised aspects like working under pressure with time constraints, the approach to professional reality allowed by practice, and pair evaluation. One of the participants, Alexandre (a false name, as all the others is this paper), felt that the learning experience was not an approach to the professional reality, as the colleagues “did not show tolerance to critics” and demonstrated “no working methods”. The rest of the interviewees mentioned aspects related to the sense of responsibility and the

opportunity to test a newsroom environment, its different sections, and the professional roles of the journalist. Nine students talked about the enrichment of professional skills obtained by participating in the project. Only one of the interviewed students explicitly referred to the practice of journalistic writing as a valuable personal experience.

About the scoring rubrics used to support the evaluation, the content analysis revealed that initially the students were reluctant to evaluate the work of their colleagues, even considering that the process was anonymous. However, all the interviews made clear that this had been a significant experience influencing their perception of the overall project. Some students prized the scoring rubrics document and process as an opportunity to develop their competences to evaluate a journalistic product. The critics they had to make of the publications of the others also brought increased concerns about their own products. As Renato, another participant, said: "I think that rubrics resulted nicely... When we look to others work, we are reflecting on our own work. This is very important in the professional context because journalists are never alone".

Interviewed participants also pointed out some negative aspects, despite being generally satisfied with the learning experience. These statements focused mainly on the platform functionality, like the difficulty in uploading videos, or its overall design. Besides these critics, the participants also commented the fact that some colleagues did not compromise with deadlines. One participant questioned whether the project did fulfil the desired need of personal projection of its members.

The interviews were also rich in content relating to the experience in community, facilitating our clarification of the results previously gathered from the thematic content analysis of the personal reports. In fact, data in personal reports published by the participants at the end of the project frequently cited positive aspects of the community experience, like teamwork, cooperation, exchange of ideas, critics, and commentaries. In the interviews, these core positive aspects seem to have lost some significance, suggesting that students were overindulgent in their first evaluation reports about the Myempowermedia experience.

Nine students considered that their experience in the Myempowermedia project did fit their notion of an online community, by eliciting ideas like common interest in "neighbourhood" events, or the bonds between the working online newspaper teams: "We were interested in knowing what everybody else was doing. I was very curious to see the published works of others." Carolina; "Our newspaper was like a small community... from the moment we sensed competition; we knew that we had to defend it. Under this perspective this was a community, yes." Sara. In fact, four participants mentioned the competition between the two publications as a key aspect of the experience in community. Only two students highlighted specifically teamwork as a valued aspect.

On the other hand, for other six participants, the community experience failed the expectations about the interaction between the students, especially after the end of the academic semester. As Silvia states "it was a bit below my expectations... some students limited to their own publishing and little more... no comments, no opinions..."

The interviews were also an opportunity to approach the representations of the students about the profession of journalist. During the project activities that took place

around online publications, the participants role-played and experienced the different tasks of the newsroom. The descriptions of the participants identified the journalist with characteristics such as being uncommitted, a good researcher, serious, with good adaptation skills to face different situations.

When questioned about how they saw their future as journalists, the majority of the students were not comfortable with the exercise of self-projection. Some said that they did not know, others saw themselves as responsible professionals. Some said that it was still too early to think about the professional challenges, and that they did not feel they had, yet, enough experience and competence. The data also suggests that the majority of the participants still demonstrate a narrow perception of the journalist profession, mostly connecting it strictly with the printed media.

Finally, the interviews were also used to gather perceptions about the abrupt ending of the project at the end of the academic semester. Although the participant students had agreed, on their own reiterated initiative, to maintain one of the publications, nothing significant was published in the community in the aftermath of the project, in spite of the full availability of the service. The local students association had also demonstrated their support, by offering to finance a paper edition of the publication, but this did not help. This revealed the abrupt collapse of the motivation with the end of the semester, although some of the students continued to publish their own portfolios, like Marine, who said “I continued to publish because I think that it is the right thing to do for the sake of learning and the transition for professional life”. The failure to continue with the project was justified by the interviewees as essentially due to lack of time. The finalization of the academic activity that hosted the experience was also mentioned.

Suggested improvements for future projects included more interactivity, better design of the platform, increased support, user-friendly tools for audio and video integration, and more public exposure.

5 Reflecting around McLuhan’s Tetrad of media effects: new wine in the old bottle

The tetrad model proposed by McLuhan and Powers [5] to discuss the effects of media change inspired us to reflect about the successive learning platforms adopted for our project as representing media changes for which it should be possible to recognize, in each case, what was enhanced, what was made obsolete, what was retrieved from past traditions, and what was reversed when pushed to the extremes. Table 1 summarizes the key aspects of this reflection, which we will try to clarify below.

The use of Moodle as a learning management system has enhanced content access and distribution, as well as the communication between the actors involved in the teaching/learning process. The forum and chat tools included in Moodle retrieved the importance of communication based on the written discourse, as well as the correlated personal commitment and involvement of the actors. This made obsolete, to some extent, the canonical strategies of teaching, and created a permanent open channel for the academic activities. On the whole, we share the opinion that Moodle and

equivalent platforms represent a technological breakthrough that frees the traditional classroom from its time and space constraints. Taking this particular media to its extreme possibilities, considering the relatively limited social networking capabilities of Moodle, we could imagine that, in spite of its independence from time and space, the learning experience could transform itself into a closed virtual bureaucracy of exchanging contents and routinely participating in forums.

Table 1: Our research project in the frame of McLuhan's Tetrad of Media Effects

Tetrad Dimensions of the Media		Cycle one: Moodle	Cycle two: Dolphin	Cycle three: Blog/ Facebook
Figure	Enhance	Communication	Sense of community	Visibility
		Content distribution		
	Retrieve	Nexus of written discourse	The Agora democracy context	Social participation
Ground	Make obsolete	Time constraints of classroom	Dispersion of social interaction tools	Idea of school as a closed space
			The academic bond is challenged	
	Reverse	Closed virtual bureaucracy	Collaboration without mechanisms to pace and control it	Learning through genuine practice

The second action research cycle enhanced the sense of community afforded by the Boonex Dolphin social platform, as well as its call for refined citizenship. This was visible, for instance, in the acceptance, by the students, of pair evaluations and reviews of their journalistic production and of the negotiation of common agreements about editorial orientation for the shared online newspapers. These examples retrieve the context of the Agora of ancient Greece as a symbolic representation of the communitarian sphere of influence. The supporting media, Dolphin, represents a solution to make social interaction tools widely available of the Internet, offering all the functionalities of social software, such as forums, chat, blogs, events agenda, content, and others. This tends to make obsolete the narrower vision of traditional online learning management systems, which are more focused on content than on interaction and more concerned with the 'delivery of lessons' than with the creation of rich learning contexts. However, and in spite of the positive results achieved, the poor external visibility of the published contents persisted in this solution, namely in what regarded the inability of the platform to attract professional journalists to participate and contribute to the personal development of the students. If we took this media to its extreme possibilities, we could imagine it reverting into intensive collaboration and interaction, maybe disturbed by a lack off mechanisms to pace and control it

enough, but essentially failing to transform that collaboration into a genuine connection with the outside world.

To overcome this limitation, the third cycle of the action research project, started in September 2010, took place in a Facebook group referenced blog. The students created this group and started to produce journalistic contents on a weekly base. Each week the students are working around different journalistic genders and presenting contents related with the profession of journalism, by interviewing professionals. We started by inviting the students to publish their academic works in a blog and index their publications in a Facebook group called "Posts de Pescada". We have also continued to use scoring rubrics for student peer assessment. Although the experience is still in progress, some preliminary conclusions are visible, especially about the external exposure allowed by Facebook. None of the previous experiences gave the students a community as large as the one they have now enrolled in Facebook, which counts more than 500 members. Also, the community built around the group renovates the idea of a wider social participation that includes, not only the students, but also former students and professional journalists, who have joined the group and are now contributing with their comments. In light of McLuhan's tetrad, this third step of our project, and its supporting media solution, represent an enhancement of the visibility of the students and their work, a retrieval of the ideal of social participation in the traditionally closed classroom, and, to some extent, the obsolescence of more traditional online approaches that still hide behind the classroom walls the activity of students who should be able to learn as early as possible to interact and collaborate with the world. If the potential of this media solution was taken to its extreme, the resulting environment might turn out to be too informal to be useful for traditional structured learning, but the connection between students, professional journalists and members of the general public could revert into a renewed version of the tradition of apprentice journalists learning in the field while practicing genuine journalism mentored by their more experienced future colleagues.

6 Conclusion

Two central ideas from the copious legacy of Marshal McLuhan have been gathered in this paper in the context of a research project where we wanted to clarify the extent to which social networking can be explored to improve the education of future journalists. First, the vision of the classroom as a city, which captures the ideals of democracy, citizenship, and the empowerment of the actors involved in the learning process. Secondly, the four-winged model for the structural analysis of media effects, which we took as a reference to analyse the key features of the three cycles of our project. By following a process that progressively moved, through its three steps, from a content-centred vision to a logic where the learning contexts gain importance over the contents, we believe we have moved closer to McLuhan's premonition that we are "approaching the age when we shall program the environment instead of the curriculum." [3].

We are, of course, still a long way from realizing McLuhan's dream in the 21st century classroom, but we would like to believe that we could at least say,

paraphrasing McLuhan in his Playboy interview (1969): “There is a long road ahead, and the stars are only way stations, but we have begun the journey.”

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