

# Learning beyond the curriculum: PLE and the development of soft-skills

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## Abstract

*In a connected world where information is available at any time and place, learners adopt a more proactive approach to learning, no longer looking at Education Institutions as the only place where they can learn. When the knowledge economy demands for new types of learners – people able to solve problems and create solutions in a just-in-time basis –, Higher Education Institutions must look at their students as active participants, fostering the development of skills that go beyond the curriculum and recognizing learning as a social process that occurs in and outside the institution walls.*

*In order to analyse how students, institution and employers see and value the existence of soft-skills (e.g. communication and collaboration skills, teamwork, online presence) and how they can be fostered in an institutionally supported Personal Learning Environment (PLE), a case study is being developed at University of Aveiro aiming to analyse students' online presence; to identify which soft-skills are more valued by students, University and the market; to study how those skills can be fostered through an institutional supported PLE and expressed in an institutional supported platform; to afford the importance of an institutional online platform in scaffolding the construction of the learners' and institution's digital identity; and to evaluate the importance (for students, the University and the market) of the existence of an institutional online presence. Data will be collected through in-depth interviews made to students from a Master Degree course (n=13), institutional representatives (n=3) and a professional from a Job and Recruitment agency (n=1), and through questionnaires applied to students.*

*Although still in an early stage, preliminary data reveals that students are using the institutional supported PLE to meet their learning needs and to build a more formal but more conscious online presence and to reveal the existence of skills valued by the marketplace.*

*In a new and connected world where students, institutions and companies face a reality different from the one they are familiar with, this case study can bring some light on how students build their online identity in a social platform provided by the Higher Education Institution they choose as students.*

## Keywords:

Change, Higher Education, learning, identity, soft-skills, Personal Learning Environments, reputation

## 1. Introduction

Society is changing. Technology is changing. Learning is changing.

In the new digital and connected world, information is available at any time and place and knowledge is built upon the connections between data, people and communities. Learners no longer look at Education Institutions as the only place where they can learn: as they adopt a more proactive approach to learning, they search, discuss, argue, and, by connecting and working with peers, teachers, experts and different communities, they also create new knowledge and build their own presence in the Web.

As the learning space is no longer constrained by the Institutional walls (Bull et al., 2008; Clark et al., 2009; McLoughlin & Lee, 2007; Wild et al., 2008), boundaries between formal and informal learning naturally blur. And, when the knowledge economy demands for new types of learners and creators (Atkins, 2005), there is a need to recognize learning as a social process that allows students the development of competencies that go beyond the formal curriculum: critical thinking and innovation, teamwork and leadership, flexibility and communication skills (Adams and Morgan, 2007; Fernandez-Sanz et al., 2010).

In a time when technologies are changing the way people learn, collaborate and express themselves, Universities face what is both a challenge and an opportunity: to foster the creation of learning communities, *places* where their students can build, explore and apply knowledge in ways that meet the labour market needs (Atkins, 2005). It is a new learning context, one that requires Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to look at their students as active participants and not only passive consumers. Learning Management Systems (LMS) – in many situations the key interface between Institution and students (Pata & Våljtaga, 2007; Marenzi, 2008) – replicate the traditional “teacher in control” learning environment and, therefore, are not designed to support a more open, flexible and “learner in control” approach (Adams and Morgan, 2007). Following a “second generation e-learning” approach (Adams and Morgan, 2006), Personal Learning Environments (PLE) put the learners firmly in control of their own learning. By fostering the interactive dimension of the network and encouraging learners to think about and analyse the relevance of what is being learned (ib, 2006), they also contribute to a more relevant learning experiences and to the promotion of a more contextualized, personal and explicit knowledge (Conole et al., 2006; Harmelen, 2006; Wilson et al., 2006; Adams and Morgan, 2007; Attwell, 2007; Chatti et al., 2007; Attwell et al., 2008; Margaryan et al., 2008; Redecker et al., 2010).

In a time when the value of a University is built upon the relation it creates between **knowledge**, **communities** and **reputation**, the longevity of a HEI is no longer a result of never changing but a credit to its ability to evolve, adapt and change over time (Atkins, 2005). When Universities start to look at their students as a reflex of their own quality, PLE have the potential to encourage an effective development of collaboration and sharing skills, offering students the means to build not only their academic curriculum but also their personal identity and profile. By integrating social tools as blogs and wikis, PLE allow the expression of learners’ thoughts, opinions and ideas, enabling the construction of an online presence that arches over many spaces (Warburton, 2009; Santos, 2009).

## **2. PLE, soft-skills and reputation in a Higher Education Environment: a case study**

In a professional landscape where individuals can no longer wait for information to be delivered by experts or professionals (Fiedler and Kieslinger, 2006), HEI should

provide their students the infrastructures needed to support the development of a “everyday just-in-time learning” (Kurhila, 2006). Developed at the University of Aveiro (UA) - Portugal, SAPO Campus is an integrated Web 2.0 services platform designed to offer a technological framework to build an institutionally supported PLE, offering its users the space to enhance, in an institutional environment, their digital presence.

In order to analyse how students, institution and the market (*employers*) see and value the existence of skills that go beyond the curriculum (e.g. communication and collaboration skills, ethics, teamwork, creativity, development of an online presence), a case study is being developed at UA with the following main goals: (1) to identify how students build, manifest and manage their online presence in both formal and informal settings; (2) to identify which soft-skills are considered as most important by students, University and the market; (3) to study how these skills can be fostered and developed through an institutionally supported PLE; (4) to study how skills are expressed in the institutionally supported platform; (5) to afford the importance of an institutional online platform in scaffolding the construction of the learners’ and institution’s digital identity; (6) and to evaluate the importance (for students, the University and the market) of the existence of an institutional online presence.

This research aims to address these questions by studying and analyzing how a group of twenty-two students (convenience sampling) from two classes of the Master Degree in Multimedia Communication Course – University of Aveiro, use an institutional social platform to learn beyond the curriculum and to work on an identity that already exists in the non-institutional digital world.

Data is being collected through questionnaires and individual in-depth interviews, made to the selected students (n=13); professionals responsible for placing students in the labor market (n=3: a representative from UA, a representative from another HEI and a professional from a Job and Recruitment agency); and a representative from the Communication, Image and Public Relations Services of the University of Aveiro, responsible for managing the image of the institution (n=1).

### **3. Discussion**

Preliminary data, collected through the questionnaires (applied before the interviews), revealed that students are in fact using the institutionally supported PLE to meet their learning needs and to build an online presence, in a sometimes more formal but more conscious way. In addition, data collected through the interviews being made to students reveal that these value the possibility of building an online presence in a platform associated to their HEI, where they can share their work and thoughts to both the academic and present/future employers. It is also referred that both University and students benefit from the adoption of a platform like SAPO Campus, a platform that works as an open portfolio through which they can build a reputation able to reveal their own excellence. When asked about which skills should be considered as the most important in the new economical and professional landscape, students also enhance that, beyond the core-competencies specific to each course, University should be concerned and invest in the development of soft-skills as entrepreneurship and online presence, pointed as *the new core skills for the new market*.

Data being collected also reveals that students are slowly but firmly merging their formal and informal online identity, adopting the potential of social software to build a presence that reveals – to the academic/social community and to the market – the skills they have developed, the ones they are working on and those they want to

invest in the future. By presenting their work, sharing their thoughts, talking about their preferences and hobbies, they are consciously working on a new kind of portfolio, revealing the existence of skills that go beyond the curriculum.

#### 4. Conclusions

When the added value of a university is built upon the relation it creates between knowledge, communities and reputation, the longevity of a HEI university a credit to its ability to evolve, adapt and change over time (Atkins, 2005). As new technologies are changing the way people learn, collaborate and express, they are also creating a new environment that offers universities the opportunity to create learning communities where learners can build, explore and apply knowledge in ways that meet the needs and realities of the new society (ib, 2005).

In the new connected world, it is important to discover and understand how students, institutions and companies perceive and manifest the development of soft-skills adjusted to the reality everyone is living in. Although still in an early stage, the case study introduced in this paper aims to bring some light on how students build their online identity in a social platform provided by the HEI they choose as students. When students enhance the importance of having an online presence associated with their HEI, it is important to reflect about the role HEI have in promoting the development of skills valuable to their students' future.

These are times of change that will change the way society looks at learning and education: grading, scores and degrees somehow blur into a constantly shifting workplace, enhancing the importance to understand more about learning to learn and learning to be. When the longevity and reputation of a HEI reflects its ability to evolve and to support the development of a "everyday just-in-time learning" (Kuruhila, 2006), there is a need to dig deeper in order to discover and understand how students, institutions and even the market recognize and value the new learning approaches and its outcomes, justifying the need of studies as the one presented in this paper.

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