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## Analyzing informal learning patterns in Facebook communities of international conferences

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### Abstract

This paper is geared to analyze learning interactions between members of Facebook communities. In particular, this study considers the online dynamics occurring in academic communities associated with international conferences. The data collection process covers 40 days of pre-event activities within the conference-related Facebook community, and aims at elaborating and interpreting such data in order to provide useful information on how to create an online breeding environment for such international events.

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### 1. Introduction

Nowadays most of socio-economic dynamics of the global community are strongly influenced by knowledge, which is one of the resources playing a leading role on the global scene in terms of orientation of economic actors towards economic growth and societal development paths (Yusuf, 2009, de Castro, Rodrigues, Esteves & da Rosa Pires, 2000; Burton-Jones, 2001; Iammarino, 2005; Palmieri & Giglio, 2014). Knowledge acts as a key resource in the starting phase of many creative and innovative processes by enhancing productivity and fostering competitive advantages (Drucker, 1992; Sawyer, 2006; Macey-Bruges, 2001; Di Pietro & Anoruo, 2006; Takeuchi, 2006; Palmieri & Giglio, 2014). In turn, learning is worth the growing attention of the academic community due to its socio-economic value for both organizations and individuals (Allen & Seaman, 2007). It is defined as the way knowledge is handed

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over between individuals (Fahey & Prusak, 1998; Tuomi, 1999). It concerns a quota of teachers' knowledge, which is filtered and acquired by learners depending on their needs and cultural background (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Twigg (1994) includes in the definition of learning also those changes occurred overtime about society's expectations, attendance patterns, institutional structures and teaching/learning approaches.

Despite the growing attention paid to knowledge and learning, a low number of studies focus on informal learning (Aramo-Immonen, Jussila & Huhtamäki, 2014). Moreover, most of the studies concerning OSNs do not involve the analysis of learning dynamics. Therefore, this study hopes to achieve an in-depth understanding of informal learning dynamics between members of Online Social Networks communities. In particular, it is geared to provide a better analysis of such dynamics in conference-related contexts. Hence, the aim of this work is providing field scholars with a more detailed study of informal learning in OSNs as well as bringing to light in advance participants' research lines and identifying those sub-networks of academicians with professional interests in common. This way, conference organizers could trigger activities devoted to ease participants' networking and to improve their satisfaction, since they would start establishing relationships with their peers before the starting of the conference. Finally, a further objective of this work is helping defining in advance conference hot topics by analyzing OSNs activities.

Authors discuss below the main theoretical concepts about informal, non-formal, formal, intentional and accidental learning processes. In Section II, the main objectives of the study are briefly explained. In Section III, the methodological approach is detailed. In Section IV, results are deepened by analyzing explicit online social media activities. Section V concludes about possible limitations, future research efforts and cross-sectorial applications.

### *1.1. Theory about learning and related research*

Informal learning is a non-structured and flexible cognitive effort performed in informal contexts. It includes discussions, talks, presentations, information, advice, guidance, dreams, arts, culture, ideas (Jeffs & Smith, 2005) and is not associated with well-defined goals set in advance. It is a learning-by-experience process generating continuous learning opportunities (OECD, 2010). It has also the highest business value since it ensures the achievement of competitive advantages and productivity growth of firms (Bancheva & Ivanova, 2015). About 75% of overall learning efforts happen in informal contexts and in a flexible way (Bancheva & Ivanova, 2015). Emerging informal learning patterns depends on evolved learners needs (Fahey & Prusak, 1998; Tuomi, 1999), learning environments, supporting technologies and society's expectations (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Twigg, 1994). Hence, new learning approaches should be defined in order to face today's high-pace development (Mosher, 2004a; Mosher, 2004b). Fahey and Prusak (1998), and Tuomi (1999) emphasize how informal learning may be related to both unconscious/unintentional and non-structured intentional/conscious activities. It may concern "life-wide learning" - i. e. "andragogy" -, "adult learning" (Reischmann, 1986; Reischmann, 2004a; Reischmann, 2004b; Reischmann, 2011), professional, organizational, intentional, unintentional, hidden, small scale and incidental learning (Reischmann, 1986). Most of adult learning activities are incidental - i. e. "en passant", "learning in passing" - (Reischmann, 1986) like in conference-based contexts (Gann & Salter, 2000; Hobday, 2000). In turn, informal learning proves to be a non-ordinary/non-routine/project-like activity (Davies and Brady, 2000). Nonetheless, conference attendees may be interested in realizing comparable researches with similar research methods and interests, thus, retracing periodically the same learning dynamics (Aramo-Immonen, Jussila, & Huhtamäki, 2014). Also organizers tend to re-use patterns, programs and structures of past editions (Aramo-Immonen, Jussila, & Huhtamäki, 2014). In conclusion, conferences are informal learning efforts, despite some routine exceptions (Popper & Lipshitz, 1998; Prencipe & Tell, 2001).

Non-formal learning is a somehow structured process with goals set in advance (OECD, 2010; Conner & Clawson, 2004; Conner, 2004; Olaniyi, 2015). It may be related to both intentional or structured accidental activities. It is a mid-way learning combining informal and formal efforts (OECD, 2010) in order to develop socio-economic and political skills in adult learning contexts (Olaniyi, 2015; UNESCO, 1997), where cognitive processes should be nurtured (Cropley, 1979), together with the self-fulfillment of learners (UNESCO, 1997), without any formal and legal compulsions (Okedara, 1980; Radcliffe & Colleta, 1989). Moreover, individual experience influences non-formal learning dynamics and learners are considered as teaching partners (Fahey & Prusak, 1998; Tuomi, 1999; Olaniyi, 2015) in a "cafeteria system" (Nyerere, 1979), where their knowledge needs are satisfied irrespective of their learning purposes. Hence, non-formal learning is different from conference-based learning (Aramo-Immonen, Jussila, & Huhtamäki, 2014; Popper & Lipshitz, 1998; Prencipe & Tell, 2001) and is worth being considered in this work.

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