Introduction

The world is seeing a paradigm shift in the way it considers education; where 50 years ago a university degree would be the ticket to a plethora of job opportunities, the corporate world has since moved from focusing on academic qualification and work experience in seeking out potential hires to actively seeking job candidates possessing specific character traits, emotional intelligence and social aptitude, or “soft skills” that are evaluated in equal if not higher importance to academic achievement. The view is further endorsed by global organisations such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (“OECD”) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (“UNESCO”), both of whom have extensively defined and endorsed lifelong learning – an overarching philosophy defined by the OECD as consisting of formal, non-formal and
informal learning – as a key proponent for economic development (Tuijman, 1996) as well as social wellness (Delors, et al., 1996).

Traditional education systems already have formal learning down to a near-rigid science; in Singapore, which is ranked 11th of 48 as at 11 May 2012 in the Universitas 21 benchmark for higher education (Williams, de Rassenfosse, Jensen, & Marginson, 2012), at least 14 years of an average person’s life will be spent in pursuit of a very well-structured formal education, beginning in kindergarten at four years of age to earning a diploma or a degree at a tertiary institution when the individual has entered his or her early 20s. Yet, soft skills development is hardly dependent on formal learning – such assets are attained through hands-on experience, relationship-building, and maturing of thought processes out of academia more so than in it. As noted by Fuller, et al. (2003, p 7), “… people learn in many different settings and that only some of this learning is classroom-based and/or accredited through qualifications, and that it can occur over the life course.”

The point of graduation from formal education into working life is where informal and non-formal learning will take precedence in a person’s further skills development. Drawing from a CapitalWorks employee survey (Cross, 2003), informal learning forms 87% of total contribution to job proficiency as weighed against formal learning methods such as job training and classes. Tough (2002) also highlighted this by suggesting there is a “20/80 split” in learning, with approximately 20% of concerted learning endeavours being formal or non-formal and 80% being informal.

The authors found that digital technologies: [Play] a beneficial role in overcoming some of the barriers which may prevent adults from engaging in learning beyond formal settings. Not only can technologies such as the internet provide the information people need to inform them what opportunities are available, they can also offer learning opportunities which are more flexible, more convenient, and, for some learners, more engaging than other options available to them (Hague & Logan, 2009, p. 17)

Given the pervasiveness of the available technology and the tools that are commonly accessible, this proposal investigates how adult learners make use of digital media tools as a platform for non-formal learning. Digital media tools consist of tools as smart phone
applications, social media such as blogs, Facebook and twitter and any other Web 2.0 based internet applications.

According to the glossy of terms in the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop, 2001) formal, non-formal and informal learning are defined as:

- **Formal learning** consists of learning that occurs within an organised and structured context (formal education, in-company training), and that is designed as learning. It may lead to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate). Formal learning is intentional from the learner’s perspective.

- **Non-formal learning** consists of learning embedded in planned activities that are not explicitly designated as learning, but which contain an important learning element. Non-formal learning is intentional from the learner’s point of view.

**Research Methods**

The main study group was facilitated by a group of lecturers who set the ground rules and were in constant touch with the respondents for the main study. To gain a better understanding of the informal learning tools used in the study and to give the Delphi study findings some context, an in-depth interview was conducted.

Four facilitators of the six-week COM355e Multimedia Public Affairs Reporting at SIM University, which was conducted in January 2010, 2011, and 2012 were invited to participate in an in-depth interview in the form of an email questionnaire. These participants were so chosen because of their use of social media as learning tools during the course of the module, which augmented the central Blackboard Discussion Board.

*The facilitators will be referred to as respondents, and the use of social media and other technologies as teaching tools will be referred to as non-formal learning tools in this report.*

**Key Findings**

The respondents found that the Blackboard Discussion Board, stipulated by the university as part of the course and in consultation with UniSIM's educational technologists offered a convenient one-stop shop for students as the ability to constantly push relevant and current content in real-time. As one participant mentioned:

“Blog(ging) in teaching multimedia journalism provides a holistic platform for
students to experience the range of media elements introduced in the course (video, photos, graphics, animations, audio, music, text) actively and intuitively. Video has great visualizing power to start discussions and engage students in learning about multimedia.”

These non-formal teaching tools not only facilitated peer-interaction and peer-critique, but also functioned as a platform for submitting assignments, clarifying course assignments requirements, concepts, terms, etc and informal raising of any concerns related to courses.

The preparations needed to introduce these tools into the curriculum and to students were surmised in two steps: content curation, and student instruction. Before the course started, triggers for discussion were carefully selected, expectations articulated, and relevant materials curated. When the course commenced, students had to be provided with instructions which included setting up of their blog, housekeeping and administrative procedures, and the Discussion Board populated with engaging threads to stimulate student participation.

The level of engagement that was required by the students in using the tools drew varied responses which from the need to log in at least once daily, to logging in once every 2 – 3 days being deemed sufficient. Though the frequency of the logins needed varied, it was of unanimous consent that effort was needed by both tutors (to provide information to prompt activity) and students alike to overcome the challenge of self-directed learning – to acquire the mindset to explore and embrace new dimensions of learning that is on demand, informal and social.

The Facilitators

The respondents agreed amongst many points that facilitators had to make their presence felt by contributing regularly to the discussion boards not only to show that the boards are being ‘monitored’, but also to motivate students. It was however, wise to regulate the frequency and volume of online activities such as exercises, extra readings and notes as these could bog down the learning process instead cause disinterest amongst students. It was also suggested that facilitators should have a consistent manner of organising information on any non-formal learning tool so that students may not miss out pertinent information. A respondent surmised their key takeaway as the following:

“I need to re-imagine my role as a journalism and media educator. I need to innovate teaching approaches and adopt new platforms – to move from gatekeeping and transmitting of information to one of aggregating and curating content, challenging and verifying assumptions, and providing platforms for students to connect and collaborate as peer learners.”
While students were interested in non-formal learning methods and appreciated the additional information and discussion points beyond the graded requirements that the tutors provided, some students displayed motivation to interact and engage with their peers only in view of being awarded mark – the platforms were viewed as simply as a tool for submitting their works.

In a post-course evaluation done by the students, 7 out of 10 students had agreed or strongly agreed that the non-learning platforms employed in the module had reinforced their understanding of the course materials, provided insights into their strengths and weaknesses, and sustained their learning interest through the multimedia tools used.

An interesting thought arose from this discussion in which an respondent expressed that coupling the non-formal learning platform with a social component such as blogs and discussion forums could debunk the transmission myth that many students still have by forcing them to play an active role in exchanging and co-creating information.

**Motivation, Opportunity, and Ability as Factors of Effectiveness in Learning**

Whilst utilising non-formal learning tools was reported to have a positive impact in the motivation and learning amongst students, possible regressive effects of information overload (too much learning tips, links, and notes being posted on Blackboard), and inculcation of an inhibitive consciousness amongst students which may develop in fear of being criticised by their peers in an open environment were highlighted.

Self-motivation was reported as the basic factor needed for individual students to get on to the platform to be able to participate and learn when asked how motivation, opportunities, and abilities factored into effectiveness to learn from the non-formal learning platforms. Though motivation had to be coaxed by incentivising participation, opportunities and ability amongst the students were abundant, as many of them were digital natives or avid users of communication technologies who embraced non-formal learning platforms effectively. In fact, many students accessed materials online and participated in the activities during office hours, and demonstrated their abilities in ECA multimedia projects that served as a showcase of their ability to integrate ideas, practices and theory. A respondent opined that students were motivated to:

“think differently as a result of being able to exploit a new communicative environment where ‘learning is more than being taught.’ Because knowledge is distributed among many stakeholders and ‘the answer’ does not exist or is not known, students learn proactively and take responsibility for their learning.”
Students welcomed the break from textbooks and prescriptive learning to the flexibility that non-formal teaching tools offered - offering ‘anytime, anywhere’ access to knowledge that formal teaching platforms lack. Such an environment where knowledge is externalised (online, transcontinental, virtual) and shared, and where its production is a collaborative effort was reported to develop more engaged students.

The break away from formal learning shifted the emphasis to skills, where students are enabled to move away from memorising facts and rules to applying knowledge to complex real-world situations and see the relevance of the course beyond the curriculum and textbook.

**Implications**

Building an additional e-platform, e.g. a dedicated Facebook page for students’ participation require much upfront effort from tutors and may not justify its need just for a short 6-week course, and may even dilute the effects and outcomes gained from the existing platforms. It was suggested that just one main complementary platform, e.g. Facebook, be selected to complement the Blackboard Discussion Board be incorporated as part of the upfront formal course development and structure, so that the implementation can be easily rolled out to all the tutors teaching the same course.

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