

Marginalised young people benefitting from an online mobile learning community

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we describe the results of an ongoing pilot study with marginalised young people, i.e. unemployed young people with no formal qualification, who interact on an online mobile learning platform. Starting from the user needs that have been reflected in the technological development of the platform as well as in the pedagogical approach the paper focuses on preliminary outcomes of the pilot study. Final results will be available at the time of the conference workshop. These outcomes are based on intermediate results from focus groups with participants, interviews with moderators of the platform and log data. Aspects of community building and of usability of the platform will be the focus of our analysis.

Keywords

Online mobile communities, marginalised young people, video format, e-inclusion

INTRODUCTION

The project ComeIn - "Online mobile communities to Facilitate the Inclusion of Young Marginalised People" - funded by the European Commission aims at reaching out to those with the risk of exclusion, in particular those who have experienced educational and socio-economic barriers and are therefore neither in employment or education situations.

Marginalised young people have fewer resources available which would protect them against marginalisation, such as social, individual, cultural, socio-economic resources to name but a few. Similarly they also experience the so-called "digital divide" in term of reduced access to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) such as computer and Internet. However, this phenomenon does not apply to mobile devices. Also most youngsters with the described daily constraints have a personal mobile phone at their disposal [1].

ComeIn takes this fact into account and sought to develop an online mobile learning platform tailored to the needs of the target group. The evaluation in the framework of the pilot study explores potential benefits for the participants and the facilitators of the platform on different dimensions.

THE ONLINE MOBILE LEARNING PLATFORM

The starting point of this two-years lasting project was to analyse the user needs in terms of functionalities of the platform and delivered content, user interface, pedagogical concept and support before the pilot start, during the pilot and after the end of the pilot. As little is known about the use of social software tools among the target group user requirements were gathered based on expert interviews and focus group discussions with marginalised young people. User needs were reflected in the technological development of the platform. Our study indicated, for instance, that marginalised young people, especially those with lower educational levels, prefer visual based technologies, user interfaces and content.

Pedagogical Approach

Based on two main learning modules of the ComeIn project - learning skills and entrepreneurship - we have created a combined learning package concerning personal development and working environment. A range of challenges in form of twelve learning steps is guiding the participants through the entire pilot period. For the participants these steps can be accessed as new episodes of a series in form of a short video every week. The twelve steps are sequenced in a way that tasks become more complex or difficult later on in the pilot (table 1). They have been developed in cooperation with experienced social workers and based on previous research [2].

Firstly, the learning steps start with simple challenges. Participants should give a short self introduction, including hobbies and interests or home environment. This step aims at focusing on the own skills and competencies. In the second challenge participants are asked to explore different fields of employment. Participants could show their own job experience or look around for new ones. Another step refers to job seeking and application activities, like for example where and how to get information about the job and the employer. For young marginalised people often keeping a job for a longer period of time is more challenging [3] than finding one. Therefore one of the learning steps is particularly dealing with this issue. Participants should think about aspects like outfit, appearance and behaviour at the work place. Another step

deals with difficulties that could occur during employment. Participants are asked, which duties have to be fulfilled by employees, but also which rights especially young people have in working relations. Participants are asked to consider where consultancy and support could be found and who could help them in case of difficulties.

Young marginalised people often lack sufficient self organisation and thus, this is reflected in one of the challenges. The participants should find answers to questions like how do I reach the workplace in time every day, what has to be done in the morning before I leave the house, do I know the timetables and how do I orient myself through the city? Health aspects and dealing with money are further important aspects for sustaining one's employability. Two learning steps are dedicated to those topics as well. As last challenge participants are asked to reflect on strategies for their future. This challenge focuses on the near future and aims that can be reached in a foreseeable period of time.

1	Self introduction
2	Job and other activity portraits
3	Self organisation
4	Motivation
5	Job application
6	Keeping a job, job routine
7	Difficulties, rights and duties
8	Communication and social competences
9	Dealing with Money
10	Help and support
11	Health aspects
12	Strategies and future steps

Table 1: Learning steps overview

Besides these learning tasks that have the function of regular inputs and ideas, the focus lies on community activities. Participants are encouraged to make actively use of the platform, access it regularly, share it with others' activities and adopt it according to their own needs and interests.

THE PILOT

From February to April 2010 the ComeIn project conducts two pilot studies, one in UK, and one in Austria. Course and structure of the two pilots differ according to regional settings, mobile provider packages and the inputs from the supporting teams. However, both pilots follow the same aims and use the same online platform; activities of all participants are visible and available for both country groups. As members of the Austrian team we focus on the part of the Austrian pilot study that takes place in Vienna.

For the recruitment of pilot participants we contacted several youth organisations which provide special offers for jobless or low educated young people. Through one of these institutions we found 24 marginalised young people who participate in the pilot study. They were provided with a mobile phone Nokia E71 and an appropriate credit to spend which allows them to participate without any costs. As an incentive, participants may keep the phone afterwards. They agreed to actively take part in the study and keep in touch with the project team until the end of the pilot. Besides three mandatory meetings during the study, the researchers and a group of moderators are available for further face to face contacts during the whole lifetime of the pilot duration.



Figure 1: Screen shots registration and homepage

In general, the ComeIn platform can be used like other social network tools but it is only open for persons taking part in the pilot (figure 1). After registration, participants have access to the platform and to all content that has been shared such as uploaded videos. They can watch videos; they can upload their own videos, or directly reply to a certain video. Videos can also be rated with up to five stars. Each participant can create groups with own editing rights and invite others to join. Videos can be published for certain groups or certain platform members only. The youth workers function as moderators with administrator rights also to ensure ethical and legal aspects.

The Video Ping Pong approach

For the whole pilot period 'challenge videos' are posted by the moderators of the platform on a weekly basis. These pre-prepared challenges follow the twelve learning step structure. The moderators created different versions and tasks of each challenge to leave it up to the participants which one they decide to answer. Participants are also free to answer to all suggested tasks and they can decide upon either doing it alone or in collaboration with others. They can also create their own challenges. They are asked to visit the platform regularly and take part at different community activities, like rating a video, creating groups etc. (cf. figure 2). Moderators provide feedback videos to uploaded answers of challenge videos. The production of new videos is encouraged via feedback and incentives.

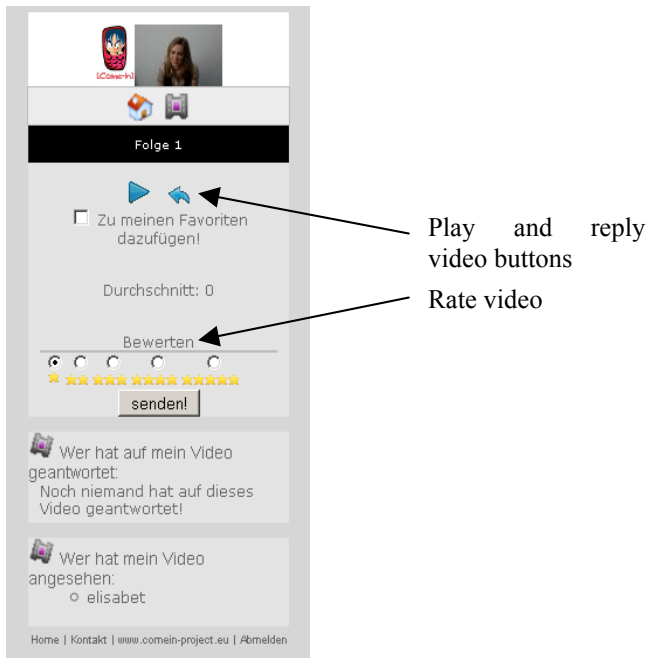


Figure 2: Screen shot video ping pong

RESULTS

As final results were not available at the time of writing the results are based herein on results that are based on a series of activities to elaborate intermediate results at halftime of the project.

We conducted a focus group discussion with 10 pilot participants, additionally we made four single interviews with pilot participants, and an in-depth interview with one of the three moderators.

We also analysed the log data gathered by the ComeIn-data base which records number and time of log-ins and activities on the platform of each participant.

Log data

The log data of the first six weeks of the three-months lasting pilot show the following: 473 videos have been uploaded by the whole community. These videos have been accessed 6,087 times and have been rated 489 times. In relation to this data the number of uploaded answer videos, i.e. 28, is rather insignificant. However, many participants have uploaded their answer video not as direct answer video but instead as ordinary video within their profile which makes the evaluation of the answer videos somewhat challenging.

In total, 62 groups have been created and these have been subscribed by the community 520 times. 1,912 messages have been exchanged within the community in this period and notable exchange has taken place between people from different regions and countries.

Different participation patterns can be noted in the community. From a very active user who has uploaded 42 videos in this period to a user that has not uploaded any video at all. However, the minimum of accessed videos on

the platform was seven videos. Thus, everybody in the community has been active in some way.

Focus Group Discussion

In the focus group discussion, the participants pointed out, how interesting it was to get in touch with foreign people. They liked sending and writing short messages and uploading personal videos to show others, how they lived and what was important in their life. On the other hand, they were asking themselves, what kind of videos could attract others. To follow the recommendations and produce only videos which last less than 30 seconds was a great challenge for them. Besides some technical obstacles they had to face during the pilot phase with the first prototype of the ComeIn platform, they wanted to have a general notification system at every time, when a new message or video had been sent or uploaded, respectively. In addition, they wanted to know, from which country and city the other participants of the platform came from. In general, the navigation of the platform was not too demanding for them, but the up- and downloading of videos should have worked faster.

Interview with facilitator

For the social worker the platform offers a “nice way to get in contact with the participants and to see their perspective of live”. According to her, they still need much support and encouragement because of developmental impairments. Even so, also youngsters with severe impairments are able to access the platform. For instance, a participant with Asperger syndrome makes use of the ComeIn platform. Also an illiterate person could participate without help.

In fact, the moderator suggests that the structure and the logical navigation through the platform support young marginalised people in their thinking and expressing ideas.

She finds it an additional way to communicate with her clients.

For the benefit of participating in the platform the youth worker expects a higher self esteem, they would come out and try something new, create groups and also encourage each other. About the challenge videos with learning steps the participants don't care too much, they rather want to do what they want to.

Interviews with marginalised young people

C., male 17 years. Migration background, not employed.

To have an exclusive access to a platform and to get a mobile phone at the end of the pilot were the main attractors for him. Also to be able to create and upload own content and the possibility to meet other people of the pilot were other reasons to join the project. He found the given limitation of video length (30 seconds) constraining, especially if he wanted to show music clips. For the first time in his life he had a phone with credit to spend on a contract basis instead of pay-as-you-go mobile phones which he enjoyed. He felt proud about his contributions, he was one of the first to create an own group. He was also one of the most active participants. Due to technical constraints he did not upload any reply video. Although the

feature worked in the meantime he did not want to try again. Once, one of his videos had to be deleted by the moderators because of netiquette violation. Recurrently he made fun about other ethnic groups. He had a strong identity with his ethnic group and personalised his profile with the Kurdish banner. Although he admitted that delicate videos should be deleted, he wished for more tolerance concerning fun. He was in contact with a girl from the other Austrian pilot sample in Styria. They were exchanging short messages via the platform. He wished that also persons he knew could participate in the platform and in general he wished for more persons to participate.

D., female 16 years, living in a children's home, not employed

Getting together and getting to know new people were the most attracting factors to join the project. She appreciated the idea of the video ping pong. She felt proud as well to be among the most active users. D. regularly answered the challenge videos of the learning steps. She was in regular contact with a participant from the UK although her English was rather weak. Sometimes she had to ask for support. She found the city of London as being cool and therefore it was interesting for her to know someone living there. The communication only took place within the community. Although they had sufficient credit to spend, they did neither send text messages nor did they call each other. She preferred having access to the platform with her mobile phone than with a computer. She easily managed to navigate through the platform, but sometimes she needed further support. During the interview she told about different persons being proud of her because she was actively taking part in the pilot. She could exactly state the number of videos she had uploaded already. She wished that the uploaded videos were given a name that one could better find out about the content.

Both interviewees were not satisfied with the technical reliability of the platform.

CONCLUSIONS AND OUTLOOK

Although the pilot is only at an intermediate stage, several lessons have been learnt so far by the research team and a preliminary outlook can be given.

The structure of the platform has been received very well. Similarly the navigation seems logical and clear to most participants although some have needed help. The handling of the rather sophisticated smart phone was unproblematic.

The video formats seemed to suit their needs since even illiterate persons or persons with Asperger syndrome could express their ideas using this format. Trust seemingly constitutes a crucial issue. On several occasions participants mentioned to enjoy communicating with other people with similar experiences but at the same time not to feel exposed to other people.

Some benefits for participants could already be observed or were stated during the intermediate evaluation activities:

Since many of the young marginalised people are often socially isolated the possibility for contact is very important. Participants felt very proud to have been asked to take part in the community and in a research project in which their experience and feedback were important and would influence further project activities. The participants appreciated to have been trusted with valuable devices and credit to spend under their responsibility.

They got much positive feedback and acknowledgement from others which contributed to their self-esteem in general.

With their video activities they had the opportunity to express themselves and to show different aspects of their daily life, some of the participants used it like a diary. They could share own interests with other members. On the long run such community activities could enhance their social capital. The platform offered an additional channel of communication with others and with adults in the community such as social workers. Similarly, personal guidance is of importance for them.

In these first weeks of the pilot, participation has been decreasing after initial excitement at the beginning. Although interventions in form of sent text messages, calls and face-to-face contact have been set, the participation in week six is significantly lower than in the first few weeks. Factors that cause this decrease of participation will need to be analysed as part of the final evaluation and need to be taken into account in future research projects addressing marginalised young people: in particular, how to attract their interest for a longer period of time is an open issue.

However, positive long-term outcomes such as an increase in self-esteem are already apparent and expected even after the end of the pilot.

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