

Microlearning with Mobile Weblogs

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Blogs and the Future of Learning and Learning Institutions

Blogs (or Weblogs) are not only having an impact on traditional media, they could also become a challenge for learning institutions. Not long ago traditional media had the news monopoly, but thanks to the internet which made publishing cheap and global, and helped by the strong fragmentation of the reader- viewership, this monopoly today no longer exists. Blogs have significantly accelerated this evolution offering an “open, real-time, two-way information flow” (Siemens 1). Today blogs already play a significant role in the current media environment as studies (PEW Internet), media companies of a new type (Gawker) and some interesting cases (Dan Rather) show.

Learning institutions like schools and universities had the monopoly of giving access to knowledge and more importantly to the community which shares and generates this knowledge. Naturally the possibility to learn by oneself – as an autodidact – was possible, but such a learning was always perilous as one lacked the setting of learning or - as we say today - the community of practice. The reason is that a large part of learning is not in what one learns explicitly, but the knowledge gained implicitly by following guides and peers. It's this commonly constructed reality, that makes one's learning “productive”, that makes it possible to use it in real life.

With the advent of blogs and other social software tools, autodidacts do now have a direct and open access to their community of practice. In the technology area which is quite naturally a forerunner in

this field (the tools were made by the first users), the immense benefits of blogs are obvious: no learning institution, no book can offer a similar “live feeling” of what’s going on, what and who is important, what one has to delve into, how to find and how to filter information etc.

Tech bloggers are also the early adopters of learning by blogging and lifelong learning. Here learning is seen as something ongoing and as an integral part of working. In accordance with constructivist learning theories, constructing the reality together with others is just normal, an example here is the recent discussion about tags and tagging in blog and other social software.

Also Bloggers have already adopted, what John Seely Brown calls “Bricolage”:

At some point it might be worth noting that the shift from linear logic to bricolage is actually a very subversive move away from the Cartesian Frame to much more of a situated, action frame. It also paves the way for considering the 'Remix Culture' as being a new form of social learning, social capital formation and becoming a more central member of a community of practice/interest.

This seems a good description of blogging, as quoting and linking are two basic blogging activities. For the blog reader this practice has not only the advantage of gaining new knowledge, but also to see the context - where it is coming from. And here we join George Siemens Connectivism:

The pipe is more important than the content within the pipe. Our ability to learn what we need for tomorrow is more important than what we know today. A real challenge for any learning theory is to actuate known knowledge at the point of application. When knowledge, however, is needed, but not known, the ability to plug into sources to meet the requirements becomes a vital skill. As knowledge continues to grow and evolve, access to what is needed is more important than what the learner currently possesses.

As George Siemens shows, blogs are not only important for what they offer today, but also for the access to what is needed in the future. As one gets to know more bloggers their interests and skills and the clusters they form, one can tap – if needed – into this network.

Having seen the impact blogs can possibly have on learning, we now see that the role of learning institutions has to change as well. They no longer can simply deliver information – that at its best is good to know or worse is totally outdated – they have to bring learners together and enable them to join professional communities of practice. If every learner has a personal learning tool, a blog, evaluation of the current situation, coaching and connecting become the essential services a learning institution needs to offer – the learning is done by the blogger himself.

The blogger or lifelong learner connection to the learning institution also will change: instead of a strong tie (e.g. taking courses for a semester) for a short period of time, the tie is weaker but it could last over a longer period of time. At its best this new kind of connection is a mutual relationship which

benefit both parties – the learning institution gains a learning partner who can help the next learner, the learner has a coach which can offer him opportunities to connect with relevant people.

Mobile Blogs and Learning

So far we have only spoken about the traditional weblog, but when the blog gets mobile, more opportunities to learn, to share and to connect are offered. Mick Masnik noted:

Increasingly, it appears that young people who grew up within the always-on technology world have no problem being connected all the time, any place, and won't think twice about turning "down time" into "productive time". Of course, they're also just as used to having their personal life encroach on their work/school life – so employers need to be prepared for this increased blurring of the boundaries. (3)

No dependency on space

As Mick Masnik notes, the boundaries between work/school and personal life will fall and the mobile device has a lot to do with it. The world we are coming from was one where physical space ruled our life – a place for home, a place for work, leisure spaces and in-between spaces. With the advent of the mobile phone, our life is no longer dependent on physical space and we can connect with others in whatever space we are.

Personal Tools

Another characteristic, shared by the blog and the mobile phone is that these are personal tools. With fixed telephony we called a place, now we call the person. With most institutional software the person is not that relevant, but with the blog the person is at the center of the themes aborded.

Discussions

Third characteristic, Blogs like Mobile Phones are strongly used for discussions. The term Live Web has been coined in regard to blogs and it mainly meant what is discussed now, what are the hot topics right now. Blogging not only seen as publishing, but also as an exchange via comments can have the characteristics of a chat, a chat nevertheless which can be studied and searched later.

Mobile phone is no longer used for calls only

It is also important to note that the evolution of mobile phones and the habits of mobile phone users make text and images in some situations more attractive than speech. As Japan, the i-mode country, and the heavy usage of SMS in western countries show, the mobile phone gets more and more used to write and read. SMS texting or using the mobile internet is used in idle time situations where most of the time others are around (during commuting, queueing etc.).

All this makes blogs and even more their mobile usage extremely interesting for the autonomous learner. We will now look at a mobile weblog in detail.

Moblogging and Mobile Weblogs

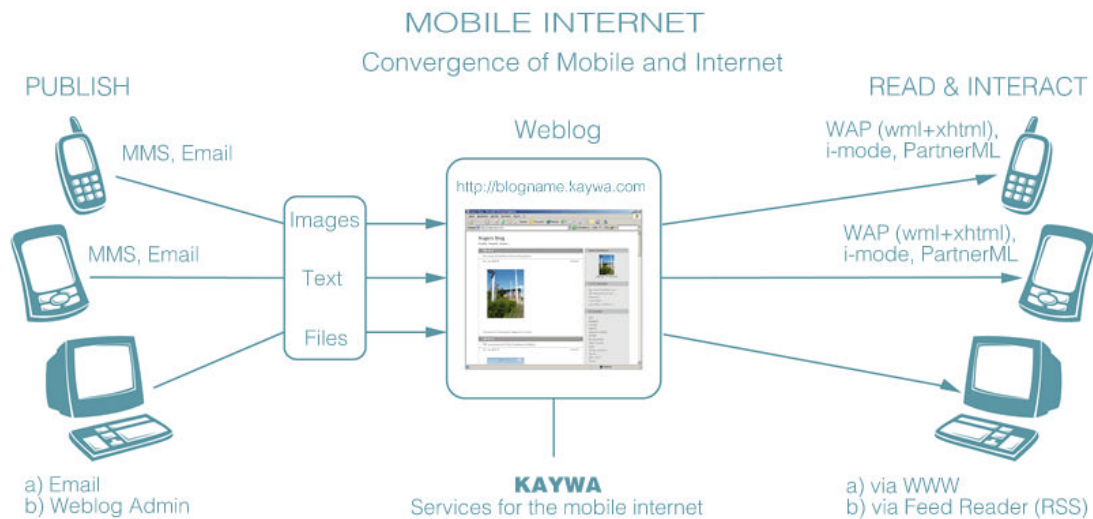
Recently one can hear a lot about “moblogs” or “mobile weblogs”. Almost always people mean that one can send photos via email to their weblog on the internet. Only a few companies also offer a mobile version of their weblog. It would therefore be good to make a clear distinction between blogs which offer “moblogging” - sending email (and MMS) to an internet weblog - and mobile weblogs - weblogs which offer a mobile version readable via a mobile device.

A second problem arises with the definition of the mobile version. As many blog companies offer today blogs in XHTML, the temptation is big to declare that their blogs also offer a mobile version viewable on a mobile device. The problem is that the web version is never satisfying and that the download of pictures optimised for the web, is - at least till now - a «money burner» on a mobile device.

We consider that the mobile version of a weblog must be conceived for the mobile device and we will show what we mean by that by discussing the mobile version of the KAYWA weblog.

The mobile version of the KAYWA Weblog

Every KAYWA weblog is usable via the Internet and all sorts of mobile devices. The internet version is normally available under an address like <http://subdomain.kaywa.com> or a freely chosen address.



The internet version is in XHTML 1.0 Transitional, so it can be browsed on some mobile devices if

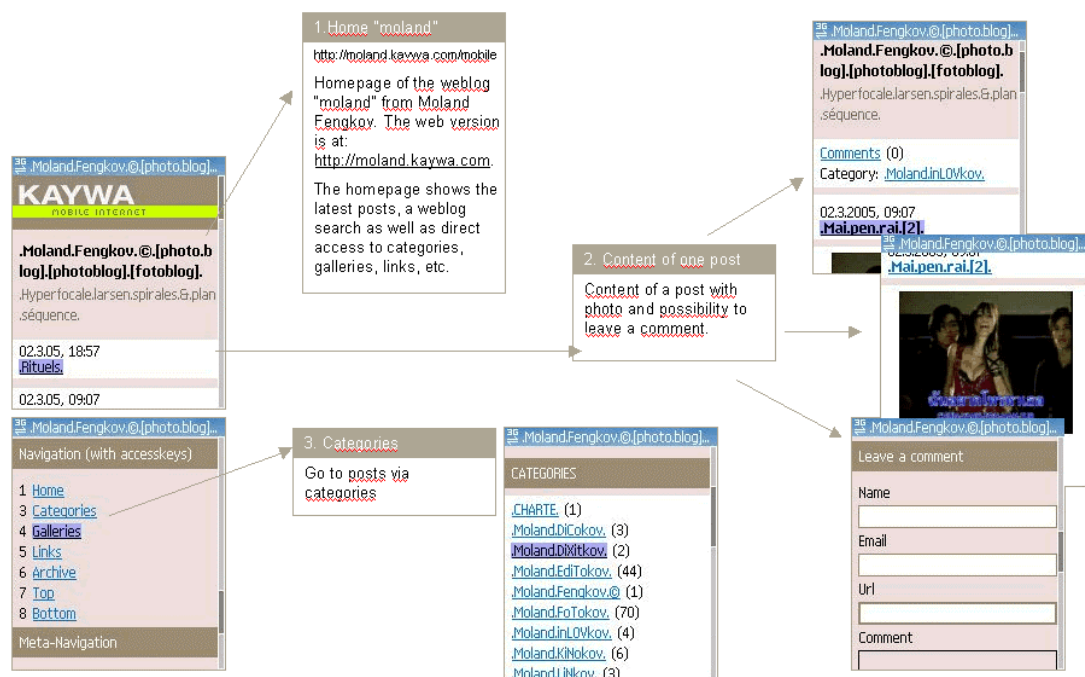
- 1) bandwidth and data traffic are not an issue and
- 2) when the mobile device has a screen large enough.

This is one of the reason we opted to create a special domain for mobile devices. The mobile version can be found either by adding "/mobile" to <http://subdomain.kaywa.com> or by searching it via the mobile portal (<http://home.kaywa.com/mobile>).

Mobile Weblog Navigation

As shown in the graphic above, there are wml, XHTML, i-mode versions as well as one in PartnerML which is Vodafone's proprietary XML format. Taking PartnerML as the source, Vodafone creates then different versions for the phones they support. For all other formats mentioned, KAYWA does the transformation for every phone type itself.

In the following screen captures we use a Nokia 6630. The screenshots were taken with the Psiloc Screen Capture Software.



Overview of Posts and Search

By arriving on the weblog, one sees the first ten posts with date, time and the title - which is something easily understandable for everyone who knows RSS- respectively feed readers. Then follows the weblog search, which is an alternative way to navigate on a mobile device.

Weblog Navigation

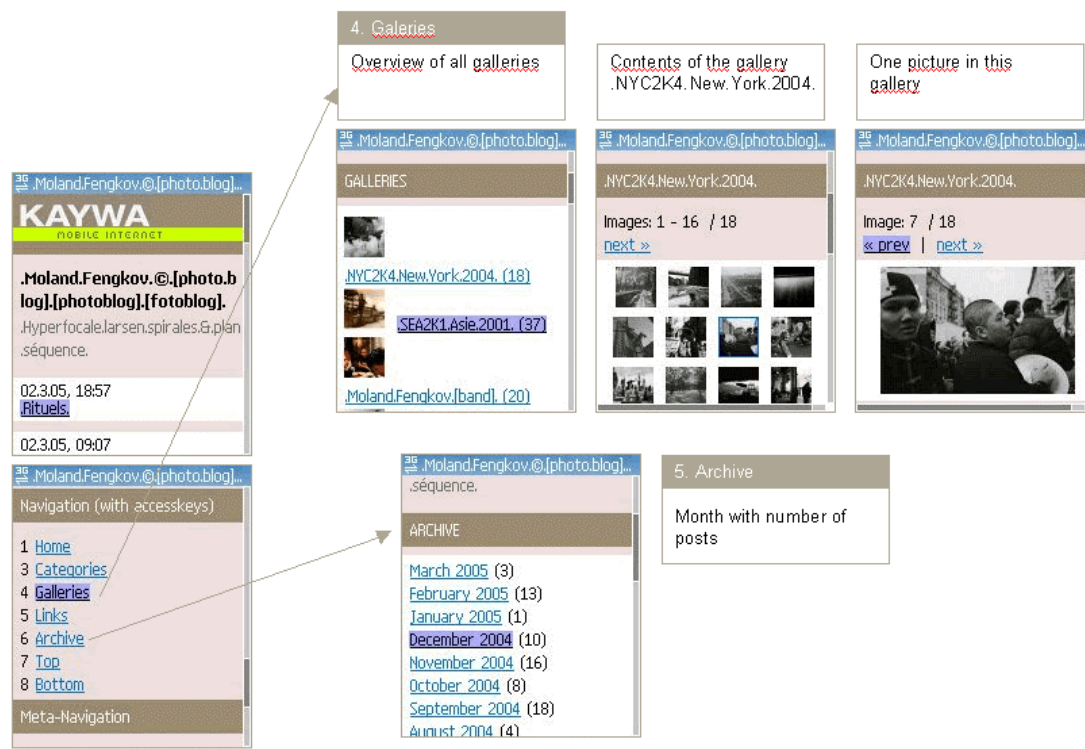
Underneath one finds the weblog navigation. On some phones one can use the access keys (used to type a phone number) for navigation purposes – that's the reason why we use numbers in front of the

navigation labels (example: 4 Galleries). Once one starts navigating by numbers, navigation changes at any point in your text are possible. It is important to note that the navigation offers the same navigation options available on the web version, but always adapted for mobile devices.

The Post: Comments, Image Rendering

If one clicks on a post, he will have the comments field on top. This makes it easy to write a comment in a longer post and also to check how many comments there are.

The image rendering is also crucial: images are rendered on the server for every screen size. And as it is possible to have posts with a lot of photos, we only render the first photo and offer links to the following. This reduces the download time as well as the cost of a single post. This is especially crucial when posts are heavily commented.



Galleries, Links

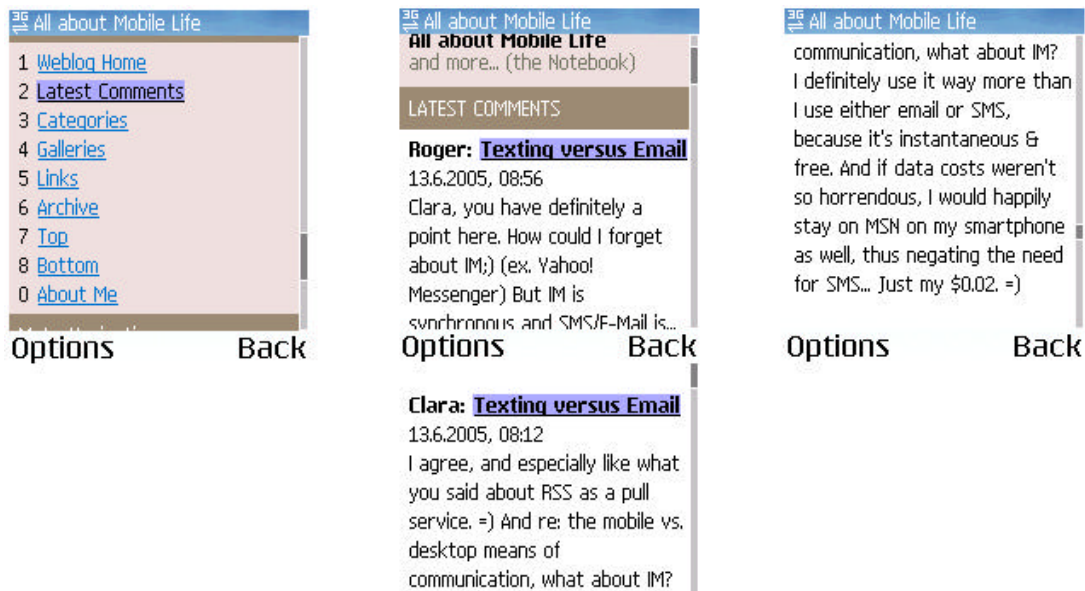
In the above image one can see links to galleries and to the post archive. In the meantime we have reduced the number of the thumbnails displayed in the overview pages of the galleries – the purpose was once more to reduce the download time. Other links go to the categories of the posts or to links. Under links one finds normally the blogroll as well as other links. All KAYWA links are transformed on the server so that one always gets the mobile version of any page. This makes it attractive to surf from one blog to the other.

Links to non-KAYWA content are in red and by clicking the links you get a warning that you are leaving KAYWA on your own risk (HTML Pages which freeze your mobile browser, pages with a large file sizes etc.).

Mobile Weblog: New Developments

Our mobile version went through several releases and by using it daily we and our customers gain an ever better knowledge of what works and what doesn't. One of the last big changes was the addition of «Latest Comments» and of the «About Me» page.

As we want the KAYWA weblogs to become a tool which is used for learning and for discussions, we needed something which enables people to interact more easily. On the internet this was never a problem, as the weblog owner receives an email when somebody writes a comment. But on the mobile where SMS or email push is quite expensive, we looked for other options. The most convincing solution was «Latest Comments».



For the blog owner and all participants in the discussion it is now possible to click «Latest Comments» to be updated on what is happening on the blog. From here you can go back to the post in case you need to get the context again.

With «Latest Comments», we have now two main entry points to the blog: one to the published posts by the blog owner (Weblog Home), one to the ongoing discussion (Latest Comments).

Interplay between Mobile Blogs and Mobile Portal

As the place of this paper is limited, we left out the description of the mobile portal, something we consider nevertheless crucial for the mobile KAYWA community for two reasons:

- 1) the mobile portal (<http://home.kaywa.com/mobile>) makes it easy to access other weblogs. Typing two, three letters already suffice to find someone's weblog.
- 2) You can see what others are posting by clicking «Latest Posts».

Future Developments

As mentioned earlier, the development of the mobile solution is an ongoing process: user participation in the development is key. The next big steps are therefore:

- 1) a way to give access to a limited audience or even to keep posts, galleries, categories etc. private. The latter makes especially sense for personal learning where you want to store – probably copyrighted – material, retrievable anytime and anywhere.
- 2) a push service via SMS and email for posts and comments. We have to find ways to make it at the same time affordable, easy to use and most importantly effective. The challenge here is to conceive a service which offers an easy interface to the newcomer and at the same time offers options concerning frequency, persons, comments and/or posts which an experienced user can personalize.

Conclusion

Having shown the impact blogs had on traditional media, it's probable to predict that blogs – together with other social software tools – will also change how we think about learning. Traditional learning institutions should be well aware of these new developments unless they want to lose ground and finally sink into oblivion. As an example how quickly these changes can operate today, one has only to look what happened to traditional analog photography.

Porting blogs unto mobile devices offers new ways of learning and gives the learner options he never had before – he can now access his knowledge anywhere and anytime and keep in contact with peers and coaches.

Taking as example the mobile version of the KAYWA weblogs, we tried to offer insights about the difference between a blog on the internet and on a mobile device. Finally, we mentioned the importance of the comments functionality as well as the mobile portal, important to keep in touch and to interact with peers and friends.

As an outlook and as a concrete learning scenario, we opened a pilot blog called «Schweizerdeutsch für Deutschsprachige» (4). This blog about swiss german for german speakers is available both via internet and mobile.

People from Germany, Austria but also from the Balkans residing in Switzerland do often know german very well, but they still do not understand a word of swiss german spoken by the local population. Unfortunately courses for swiss german are sparse and the few existing books are outdated.

A mobile blog with its immediacy can offer a simple tool for interactive language learning. We started with a Swiss German dialogue, available as mp3 (a podcast and internet version as well as a version downloadable directly to your mobile phone) and as a transcript in written form, and some additional comments. People interested to learn Swiss German can now engage in a dialogue via comments. In an official learning environment, we would offer all participants a personal weblog to take notes, record themselves, engage in conversations and start helping each other.

1) John Seely Brown

E-Mail conversation with the author. See <http://roger.kaywa.ch/p772.html>

2) George Siemens

Connectivism: A Learning Theory for the Digital Age

http://www.itdl.org/Journal/Jan_05/article01.htm

3) Mike Masnik

<http://www.thefeature.com/article?articleid=101543&ref=6703266>

4) Schweizerdeutsch für Deutschsprachige

Internet: <http://schweizerdeutsch.kaywa.ch>

Mobile: <http://schweizerdeutsch.kaywa.ch/mobile>