

# LEARNER COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

## USING SOCIAL SOFTWARE TO SUPPORT INFORMAL LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

### 1) WHY FOCUS ON INFORMAL LEARNING?



Informal learning at Glasgow Caledonian University.  
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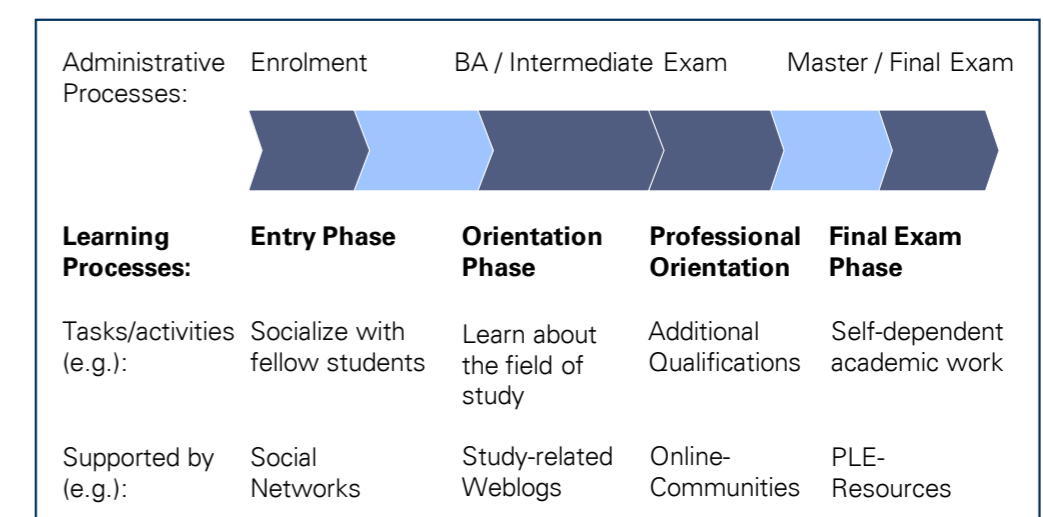
Research on e-learning focuses largely on formal contexts of learning (Baumgartner 2009). Although the significance of informal learning is known since the 1970s from the work of the UNESCO commission (Faure 1973), there is little work on informal learning in higher education. However recently, the so-called Bologna reforms have pointed out the importance of self-organisation of student learners. Thus, Carstensen (2007, p. 211) calls for institutions to actively design the students' self-organised learning processes.

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### 2) WHAT CHALLENGES DO STUDENTS OF HIGHER EDUCATION FACE?

Focusing on informal learning puts the learners and their learning practices in the centre. What informal learning activities do students practise during the different phases of their studies? What challenges do they face?

The project assessed the students' needs with the help of a „student life cycle“ model that was reformulated from a pedagogical point of view (cf. Schulmeister 2007). Qualitative research (focus group interviews with students) was carried out to validate and empirically expand the model with emphasis on informal learning practices.



A life-cycle model of students' informal learning

## Objective

» To support the informal learning of students of higher education in Saxony with social software. «

### 3) SOCIAL SOFTWARE AND INFORMAL LEARNING

Surveys show that a majority of students use social software (wikis, social networks etc.), but only few use it in the context of their studies (Kleimann et al. 2008). Students even refuse to use social software for learning (Jones et al. 2010). Furthermore, adopting social software in formal learning contexts appears to be structurally inconsistent (Kleimann 2007). In informal learning contexts, on the other hand, social software is attributed great potential to support learning processes (Baumgartner 2009, Erpenbeck/Sauter 2007).

The project attempts to highlight the benefits of different social software tools supporting students' informal learning practices. The student life cycle is used to illustrate, e.g., how personal learning environments (PLEs) help to connect learners' experiences and results across distinct phases.

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### REFERENZEN

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Erpenbeck, J.; Sauter, W. 2007: Kompetenzentwicklung im Netz. New Blended Learning mit Web 2.0. Köln: Luchterhand.

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### 4) HOW CAN UNIVERSITIES SUPPORT INFORMAL LEARNING?

The following provisions, technologies, and strategies are recommended to support informal learning in higher education:

**Provisions:** supporting measures to promote, spread and make sustainable the use of social software among students, e.g. marketing and training provisions

**Technologies:** e.g. interfaces to integrate content of the Learning Management System OPAL into PLE systems.

**Strategies:** technologies and provisions should be integrated into a strategic approach to support informal learning of students of higher education.

For further information, please visit our blog:

<http://blog.tu-dresden.de/learnercommunities/about-the-project/>