Using social media to activate unemployed youth and early school leavers and enhance their economic and social participation

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Abstract

This paper covers the preliminary investigation that seeks to determine the design principles for the development of intervention.

For active participation in professional and social practices, social skills and social networks play a role of growing importance. The personal development of these skills increasingly depends on the mastery and use of social media and access to forms of informal learning in networks.

The paper presents the results from the first phase of an educational design research, identifying and describing design criteria that can be used for designing learning arrangements that are (1) designed for school leavers and unemployed youth with little access to learning opportunities; (2) more context driven than curriculum driven; (3) situated in an out-of-school context and (4) providing malleable technology that can be appropriated by the intended users.

The findings that will be presented illustrate the effects of social media on the development of social competences and the building of social networks as important contributing factors to self-sufficiency and opportunities for economic and social mobility. The findings further illustrate the ideas and believes of youth and social professionals with regard to active participation, social networks and social media. Putting the ‘social’ back in guidance, learning networks and participatory practices by means of social media, requires the negotiation and appropriation of use, thereby completing the design in use, promoting a sense of psychological ownership and closing the critical ‘participation gap’.

Introduction

In the Netherlands for many consecutive years, a large number of young people have turned their backs on the education system, leaving school without a basic qualification. The problem of early school leaving is most visible in secondary vocational education, where every year between 25.000 and 30.000 young people drop out of school. A significant part of these early school leavers (25% - 50%) are defined as ‘quitters’ (Eimers, 2006; Meng, Coenen, Ramaekers & Buchner, 2009). Quitters are persons who drop out of school because of their disengagement with school (Appleton, Christenson & Furlong, 2008; Meng, Coenen, Buchner & Ramaekers, 2009). This means that quitters are different and stand out from classical ‘youth at risk’, who mainly struggle with school because of a multitude of personal and social problems. Quitters are either pushed or pulled out of school, being frustrated or disappointed by the school system on the one hand or lured by the prospect of work and salary on the labour market on the other hand (Meng, Coenen, Ramaekers & Buchner, 2009).
In recent years, ‘quitters’ were believed to eventually manage themselves on the labour market and in society and therefore were not considered vulnerable. Economic growth and the strong demand on the labour market were believed to solve the problems of quitters without further need for explicit interventions. National ESL policy focused its attention entirely on classical ‘youth at risk’, called the priority group. Local municipal and educational institutions subsequently implemented programmes and measures that totally ignored the ‘quitters’.

‘Quitters’ have only a limited number of options at their disposal to develop themselves outside mainstream education. Although there is a tendency within the ESL policy to "move along with the quitters' (Ministry of Education, 2006), in creating alternatives outside of the education system, formal educational tracks are still considered to be the most promising to protect ‘quitters’ from an uncertain future on the labour market, underlining the still strongly felt importance of formal certificates. The possibilities and actions arising from this policy are limited to forms of formal learning. This may include work-based learning, partly staged by regional colleges for secondary vocational education (ROC’s), learning through special forms of guidance and counselling, supervised by the regional institutions for registration and coordination (RMC's) or work mediation through the ‘work first approach’, supervised by the local administrative office for employed persons insurance schemes (UWV Werkbedrijf). Another option consists of the formal recognition of previous work experience or prior learning, i.e. APL. Several public and private institutions, including regional colleges for secondary vocational education, offer APL to individuals and companies. These procedures lead to a nationally recognised ‘certificate of experience’, that in turn can be substituted by a formal educational certificate by examination boards of the regional vocational colleges. So current Dutch government policy, i.e. the ‘Act Investing in Young People’ (2009), primarily aims at the formal qualification of young people through school programmes, learning on the job or the accreditation of prior learning (APL). These alternative arrangements are often one-sided, focusing solely on professional skills for the promotion of employment, i.e. the participation on the labour market. This means there is no attention for social development and participation on behalf of the individual in these arrangements. If qualifying is no option, young people should at least be sufficiently equipped to participate on the labour market in a sustainable way.

The fact that alternative arrangements don’t suffice is only part of the problem. When looking at the rapidly and radically changing economic and social circumstances, it is evident that the demands and requirements of the labour market and civil society are becoming ever harder to meet for low educated.

**Rationale**

Using social media for the development of social skills and social capital

They are called new media, also going under the name of social media, interactive media or Web 2.0. These media provide opportunities for forms of informal learning, going beyond the addition of ICT-tools to traditional learning environments, like LMS’s. The new media offer particular opportunities in areas of interaction, participation, and thus essentially to social innovation of learning, both in relation to the instructional and the interaction design. The technology continues to constantly evolve and will further optimize (Merriënboer & Kanselaar, 2006) and broaden (Zürcher, 2007) learning environments if adequately based on an appropriate pedagogy, like for example a "contribution-oriented pedagogy" (Collis & Moonen, in Bastiaens, 2007). The didactics of informal learning, based on concepts like co-creation and ‘user control’, approximates what is called self-organized or self-regulated learning. Obviously taking with professionals constantly debate be conducted or the media then or the instruction is most important (Bastiaens, 2007), or technology a natural place in educational beliefs of teachers (Kanuka, 2004) and whether the use of modern media is also effective (Cisco Systems, 2008).
The appropriate research design for the exploration of the possibilities of learning networks and the use of social media is design research (Nadeem, Stoyanov & Koper, 2008) in which, in addition to the focus on intervention and development (Martens, 2007) and an optimal mix of media and methods (Van Merriënboer & Kanselaar, 2006; Wijngaards, 2007) there should be attention for theory building (Van Merriënboer, & Kanselaar, 2006, Martens, 2007).

Learning networks or informal learning communities are considered the appropriate organisational form for informal learning (Zürcher, 2007; Sloep, 2008) and 'self-organized' learning (Nadeem, Stonayov & Koper, 2008). Direct social interaction (Veenstra, Dijkstra & Peschar, 2004) and indirect social interaction in learning networks (Koper, 2005) may contribute positively to an individual’s learning career. But in order to ensure that learning networks, as a manifestation of social capital (Berghouwer & Van Wieringen, 2006), actually play a positive and measurable role in informal learning, it doesn’t suffice to design a technology-rich learning environment as a result of the educational design and digital didactics (Van Merriënboer & Kanselaar, 2006). The final design should also take in to account the 'social affordances' (Kirschner, 2002) in order to facilitate social interaction in online learning environments (Kirschner 2004, 2006; Martens, 2007; Sloep, 2008).

Research Question

This paper focuses on the design principles that can be derived from studying and analyzing the development of social competences and social capital and the use of social media in different social and cultural processes. These design principles function as a basis for developing alternative learning arrangements for young early school leavers, so called ‘quitters’.

This educational design research (EDR) focuses on dual forms of learning in informal, small professional practices that are more context than curriculum driven. Taking the EDR-approach offers the advantage of a more realistic and authentic contextual setting of the research. Furthermore EDR is oriented on finding practical solutions for complex educational problems. Finally EDR also stresses the cooperation with respondents and stakeholders.

Together with social partners in the realm social support and welfare, including local institutions such as RMC and UWV, special education, child welfare and youth care, these new learning arrangements are designed and tested. This process of intensive collaboration to redefine learning for the prevention of exclusion and maximizing competence of the ‘quitters’ (also requires social innovation and use of social media Berghouwer & Van Wieringen 2006; Eimers & Visser, 2009).

The following central research question is formulated:

"What type of learning arrangements, offered in cooperation with social partners in an informal out of school context using social media, contributes to the development of social competences and social capital of early school leavers?"

The sub-questions to be discussed will concern the
- Social competences:
  o what skills are important for increasing sociability?
- Social capital
  o how are social networks developed, maintained and expanded?
  o what skills are needed to join and co-construct these networks?
- And the involvement of social media
  o which ‘social affordances’ are required when using social media in informal leaning arrangements?
Method

**Educational Design Research (EDR)**

When looking at the problem at hand, the most compelling research approach to the problem is probably educational design research (EDR). First EDR aims at improving educational practice while focusing on relevant, workable and effective interventions: EDR offers a strong practical and realistic perspective. Second, EDR usually starts where no or few validated principles are available to solve educational problems: EDR is not biased by certain educational theories or dominant models, i.e. theory driven, but aims at developing empirically grounded theories. Third, EDR aims at enriching theory with improved articulation of principles that underpin their impact: EDR tries to approximate theory and not only falsify assumptions. Fourth, EDR entails the cooperation of respondents and stakeholders in the entire process of designing, revising and evaluating: EDR enhances the acceptance of solutions and closes the gap between educational research and practice. (Van den Akker, Gravemeijer, McKenney & Nieveen, 2006; Plomp, 2009)

A core element of EDR are the so called ‘design principles’. Design principles have a double function. On the one hand, they serve as requirements or heuristic guidelines for the construction of the intervention which in turn serves as solution for the educational problem. On the other hand design principles can be seen as theoretical insights or results (‘theoretical yields’ or ‘local theories’; Plomp, 2009) that have proven to be valid and valuable.

From this follows that EDR doesn’t start with the development of interventions from well established theories but with the ‘discovery’ of appropriate design principles from within the problem context through literature review, contextual analysis and consultation of practitioners (‘needs analysis’).

EDR can be characterized as (Van den Akker, 2006):

- interventionist: the research aims at designing an intervention in the real world;
- iterative: the research incorporates a cyclic approach of design, evaluation, and revision;
- process oriented: a black box model of input-output measurement is avoided; the focus is on understanding and improving interventions;
- utility oriented: the merit of a design is measured, in part, by its practicality for users in real contexts; and
- theory oriented: the design is (at least partly) based upon theoretical propositions, and field testing of the design contributes to theory building.

Additional characteristics (Zitter, 2007; Plomp, 2009) are:

- a holistic approach (EDR does not emphasize isolated variables)
- cross-border approach (EDR combines research and practice)
- highly interventionist (creating/revising its own ‘object of study’: the arrangement to be designed simultaneously acts as the arrangement under study).

The drawbacks of an EDR approach are its cross-border approach, “… the advantages from the perspective of educational research are typically the disadvantages from the perspective of educational practice, and vice versa.” (Zitter, 2007). Furthermore, EDR endures “complications from sustained interventions in messy situations” (The Design-based research collective; in Zitter, 2007). Finally, EDR has a short scientific history, an abundance of varying examples and is in need of “standards that improve the quality of this approach” (Kelly 2004; Dede, 2004 in Van den Akker et al. 2006).
As Plomp (2009) puts it, “it is not self-evident how the design of interventions may contribute to theory building” (p. 17). After all, design principles don’t only act as the heuristic, tentative starting point but also as the theoretical result (‘an understanding of the ‘how and why’ of the functioning of the intervention’, Plomp, 2009) of the scientific endeavor of design researchers. Although Plomp sees the final design principles as a result of ‘systematic reflection and analysis of the data collected during this cyclical process’, one can, as Zitter (2007) did, question the blurry and messy circumstances in which reflections by researchers and practitioners probably take place, as theoretical soundness and practical relevance both struggle for supremacy. In this sense EDR is not entirely free from any bias.

Van den Akker et al. (2006) however give little attention to the process of reflection during the design and revision stages. Instead, the scrutinious evolution of design principles from cycle to cycle is left in the hands of the researcher himself, who has to show ‘adaptability’ (‘being tolerant’; ‘allowing the study to be influenced’; Plomp, 2009) when striving for synergy of research and practice during these cycles.

I therefore propose to extend the EDR approach and the guidelines presented by McKenney (in Plomp 2009) with the kind of structured reflection as described by Reymen (2001). McKenney presented the following guidelines for conducting design research:

- have an explicit conceptual framework (based on review of literature, interviews of experts, studying other interventions)
- develop congruent study design, i.e. apply a strong chain of reasoning with each cycle having its research design
- use triangulation (of data source, data type, method, evaluator and theory) to enhance the reliability and internal validity of the findings
- apply both inductive and deductive data analysis
- use full, context-rich descriptions of the context, design decisions and research results
- member check, i.e. take data and interpretations back to the source to increase the internal validity of findings.

Reymen argues to combine systematic reflection with reflection during the design process, thereby decreasing the chance of overlooking important aspects and increasing the chance that reflection is performed during the design process. The method developed by Reymen (2001) consists of four consecutive steps:

- Ending a design session with reflection on the design situation and design activities, using the forms and checklists.
- Starting a new design session with reflection on the design situation and design activities, based on the use of the checklists and based on information written down on the forms at the end of the previous session.
- Planning the duration of the current design session by planning the end of the design session and thus also the moment for the start of the next reflection process.
- Designing during the core of the design session.

The advantage of this line of research is that the design activities are fully embedded in every day practice, combining field and lab so to say. This embeddedness contributes to the practical relevance of the final results and increases the involvement of social professionals from local institutions, youth workers, teachers and counsellors. Furthermore the recurring reflection during the different development stages not only contributes to the construction of new knowledge, it also strengthens the role of professionals as reflective practitioners.

The diagram below (adapted from Van den Berg & Kouwenhoven) symbolizes the research design and coherence between the different research phases.
The literature review is mainly constricted to scientific studies that focus on social media, social skills and social capital and its development. In this review we used the previously detailed operationalization of the underlying concepts. In addition to the educational context we also looked at the context of youth participation policy in the Netherlands.

Contextual analysis largely consists of desk research. Here we used national reports and studies in the form of quantitative analysis and policy evaluations, then should be considered reports of ROA (Research Centre for Education and the Labour Market), Oberon, Sardis, the Verwey-Jonker Institute and the Dutch Youth Institute. It builds on the local reports and studies regarding the ESL policy, youth participation policy and the local educational agenda.

The needs analysis has been based on focus groups with both youth, social professionals and middle management from local institutions (ROC, RMC, UWV Werkbedrijf, et cetera). The latter group is part of the research on meso-level; executives hold key positions and influence the way interventions are implemented in the local context. From this position, they are able to better determine how to translate the different needs.

Context and show the extent need an interesting intertwining. The inventory during the focus groups is not only to questions and needs of practitioners, but will 'practice' awareness of all sorts of problems in terms of social competence and the effect of the competencies in the economic and social participation of youth. Awareness among young people, their mentors, schools and municipal institutions is also an explicit goal of the inventory of social skills needed in the phase of analysis and context.

The result of this phase is a review of practical knowledge which clearly specifies the social skills and types of networks that are relevant in the design of the learning arrangement.

The focus group method is a series of open but structured conversations that take place with a representative group of respondents (see groups below) about a predetermined topic. The focus group method is a qualitative, explorative research method which enables very complete, exhaustive data collection. A total of nine meetings with focus groups were arranged.
<table>
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<th>Datum</th>
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<tr>
<td>12-10-2010</td>
<td>RMC-medewerker / Trajectbegeleider</td>
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<td>13-10-2010</td>
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<td>11-01-2011</td>
<td>Adviseur (gemeente); Projectcoördinator; Projectmanager; Directeur; RMC-coördinator; Orthopedagoog/ coördinator; Projectleider</td>
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<tr>
<td>13-01-2011</td>
<td>Orthopedagoog; projectcoördinator; trajectbegeleider, coördinator/begeleider; leerkracht SEN; projectbegeleider</td>
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<td>19-01-2011</td>
<td>Projectleider; projectleider/coach; externe mentor (2x); specialist loopbaancentrum (2x)</td>
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<tr>
<td>18-03-2011</td>
<td>AKA (ROC van Twente) Scoren door scholing</td>
<td>9 jongeren en 1 begeleider</td>
<td>M:7 V:2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28-03-2011</td>
<td>AKA (ROC van Twente) Assist</td>
<td>8 jongeren en 2 begeleiders</td>
<td>M:4 V:4</td>
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<tr>
<td>14-04-2011</td>
<td>'t Schip (VSO); afdeling Educatie</td>
<td>9 jongeren en 1 begeleider</td>
<td>M:5 V:4</td>
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<tr>
<td>29-04-2011</td>
<td>De Kapstok (SSTS); afdeling De Bakso</td>
<td>8 jongeren en 1 begeleider</td>
<td>M:8 V:0</td>
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The recordings of the focus groups were all transcribed. These transcripts are currently being analyzed with ATLAS Ti. Not all transcripts have yet been fully processed, but it is already possible for some topics to present preliminary results. For the data analysis we used a coding method. The operationalisation of the conceptual framework functions as a frame of reference for the coding process. For the perception of social media and social networking we primarily used the list of perspectives on social networking of Larsen (in Davies & Cranston, 2007).

An article that covers the differences (i.e. emerging vs. forced concepts) and similarities between the two ‘traditional’ approaches within Grounded Theory of Glaser and Strauss is written by Udo Kelle (2005). Kelle describes Grounded Theory Approach (GTA) as a process of choosing between diverse, alternative concepts with different theoretical backgrounds, starting from a heuristic framework. He stresses the fact that the interpretation, description and explanation of the empirical world through categorical frameworks, requires the integration of previous knowledge and new empirical observations. These heuristic, categorical frameworks are the starting point (‘axis’) for further theory building, i.e. the construction of categories en propositions that are empirically underpinned by axial coding. A researcher should also falsify the framework, i.e. the categories and propositions, through "a meticulous search for negative instances and for empirical phenomena to which the used heuristic categories do not apply and which would call for their reformulation or abandonment" (2005, [52]). This style of inquiry should be supplemented by strategies of further corroboration of the categories and propositions with growing empirical content.

De Boer (2011) argues that the choice between different GTA approaches should be somehow pragmatic and practice oriented, depending on the kind of knowledge a researcher is looking for. De Boer differentiates three types of ‘Straussian’ GTA approaches based on Corbin (2008), Charmaz (2006) and Clarke (2005). Corbin emphasizes the discovery of concepts and theme’s through systematic, yet open and flexible data-analysis. Corbin remains closest to Strauss’ ideas about GTA. Charmaz emphasizes the discovery of processes through the analysis of human actions and the construction of an interpretative framework. Charmaz characterizes the entire research process as a constructivist process involving the researcher, respondents and fellow researchers. Clarke finally emphasizes the discovery of relations and networks through the analysis of social situations, i.e. the analysis of action, interaction and discourse. The situational analysis supports the drawing of maps representing the symbolic shifts and changes in society or within organizations. All three of them stress the role of the researcher as founder of concepts, processes or maps. Especially Charmaz and Clarke point out that the result of the GTA is that of a joint effort and shared interpretation, involving the researcher, respondents and fellow researchers.
Because this study is not solely meant to build new theoretical knowledge and focuses on processes, it seems plausible to follow the direction suggested by Charmaz.

**Involving respondents and fellow researchers**

Taking into account the self-responsibility and self-determination of modern youth, i.e. ‘agency’ (Wildemeersch et al., 2001; Pohl et al., 2007; Hoskins & Deakin Crick, 2010), the design process should have the characteristics of a participatory approach, creating the room to involve young people as co-designers (co-creators) of the intended learning arrangement. Direct involvement of youth and social professionals in the design process (Bakhtin, 1979/2000, Carroll, 2004) promotes the quality and perceived usefulness (Gibson, 1977), reinforces the feeling of ownership (Barkil, Paré and Sicotte, 2008; Gaskin and Lyytinen, 2010) and increases the acceptance of new forms of social interaction (Desanctis & Poole, 1994; Kreijns, Kirschner & Jochems, 2002). New forms of technologically mediated social interaction should take due account of non-task-related psychosocial factors that play a role in interaction and collaboration processes (Kreijns, Kirschner & Jochems, 2002). In addition, during the design stages, there should be an ongoing debate with professionals about relevant questions such as the importance (‘dominance’) of technology versus instruction (Bastiaens, 2007), the obvious or contested place of technology in the belief system and attitudes of educational professionals (Kanuka, 2004; Kral 2010) and whether the use of the proposed technology can be considered educationally and socially effective (Cisco Systems, 2008).

**Conceptual framework**

Normative, organizational and social communicative dimensions and self-regulation skills become increasingly important in professional occupations (Kraayvanger & Hövels 1998; Onstenk, 2002; Borghans, Ter Weel and Weinberg, 2005; Berghouwer & Van Wieringen, 2006; CEDEFOP, 2009). The ability to interact on an interpersonal level in work relationships has even become an important determinant of employment opportunities and the level of income. The importance of the quality of this interaction has mainly grown through technological and organizational changes in work organizations (Borghans, Ter Weel & Weinberg, 2005). Even in the case of low-skilled jobs, employers nowadays show more appreciation for social skills than they do for professional / technical skills (Berghouwer & Van Wieringen, 2006; MASS project, 2011).

The development of identity and a personal career, asks from ‘new learners’ that they are capable of participating in networks. In those networks learning is characterised by flexible and constructivist learning behavior in the form of the exploration of authentic experiences, in alignment with personal incentives (Wildemeersch et al, 2001, Diepstraten, 2006, Ito 2009).

Developing and sustaining social capital in the form of networks and resources influences the chances of getting and retaining a job (Berghouwer & Van Wieringen, 2006, De Graaf-Zijl, Berkhout, Hop & De Graaf, 2006, Petit et al, 2011). According to Kuijpers (2005) "networking" is one of the five competencies that contribute to professional career development. The conditions for networking and network patterns meanwhile are changing radically over time (Ester & Vinken, 2003; Völker, 2008), especially due to the influence of the possibilities offered by technology, i.e. the new media (De Haan, 2008). More or less stable and collective behavioural patterns and civic styles arise whilst dealing with cultural issues and social processes on identity formation, sociability and the creation of meaning (Pohl, Walther & Stauber, 2007, Van den Boomen, 2007, Ito 2008).

In a growing number of social fields and economic sectors, the influence of social media is rapidly increasing. This influence manifests itself particularly in the way people share knowledge, collaborate, enter into new relationships, form and maintain communities, or negotiate identity and meaning. Both social and occupational activities are increasingly combined with digital contacts and forms of communication and cooperation and the, sometimes temporary, creation of virtual
communities or social networks. Technology-driven social innovation, with regard to the flexible organization of work processes and the fluid organization of social relationships, is the catalyst for the emergence of new genres of participation and forms of literacy (Jenkins, 2006; Ito, 2009; Huysmans and De Haan, 2010). The high accessibility of the Internet and the growing activity of young people on the web seem to have closed the former digital divide. But the low educated still feel digitally insecure (OECD, 2011) and illiterate (Van Dijk & Van Deursen, 2011) leaving the impression that a new ‘digital gap’ has emerged that entails economical and social consequences (Jenkins, 2006; De Haan & Adrichem, 2010, Kral, 2010).

In informal learning that takes place out of school, young people develop a positive self-image and a positive image of others. This allows them to acquire implicit and situational bound knowledge, based on their personal experience in professional practice, which they then in turn can apply in their socio-cultural practices (Eraut, 2000). Assisting young people in realising such situational forms of meaningful learning that contribute to their own life and professional career, not only requires to help them building connections with their own environment, but also with situations and experiences in different social, political, cultural and economic areas of work and citizenship (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wildemeersch, 2001; Onstenk, 2002; Berghouwer & Van Wieringen, 2006), thereby creating so called ‘open learning environments’ (Wildemeersch, 2001; Zürcher, 2007).

These interrelated developments concerning social competences, social capital and social media, call for research, questioning and exploring the type of out-of-school learning arrangements that would most benefit low educated quitters. At the core of these arrangements stand the development of social competences, the ability to develop and maintain social capital and the strategic use of social media. These three different core elements somehow interrelate and interact, thereby reinforcing each other, as will be elaborated further on in this paper. The research should therefore also expand to the types of engagement of youth in social and cultural activities and interaction and the underlying learning processes and skills demanded from young people (De Haan & Adrichem, 2010, Pohl, Walther & Stauber, 2007, Van den Beemt, Akkerman & Simons, 2010).

Based on the problem and literature review is the following conceptual framework is developed to guide further study.

Because the variables social competence and social capital have a complex and reciprocal relationship, these two variables can each also be regarded as intervening variables. The three central concepts in the framework have in common that they have a short scientific history, are to be understood broadly and not yet clearly and univocally defined and also show a complex reciprocal relationship. For a clear understanding of the function of the above framework for this research it is therefore necessary to further operationalise these concepts.
Results

The first ideas about possible design principles and the direction in which to seek a possible solution were inspired by the Not-school concept from the UK. This concept rests on the belief that school leavers should not be pushed back to school but should be re-engaged in learning in meaningful contexts with the goal of rebuilding confidence, self-esteem and social skills.

Literature review

Social Media

Social media are a relatively new form of media leading to new media use. The concept can be interpreted as an alternative to the widely used label "Web 2.0". Especially the adjective "social" does more justice to the participatory features and social nature of this second generation Internet technology. In many disciplines, ranging from communication sciences to cultural sociology, various definitions are the starting point or result of research. In this study I prefer a semantic approach to the concept to start with, emphasising interaction, participation (‘agency’), structuration and ownership as key elements of the meaning of social media.

Although Derksen and Beaulieu (2011) refute the existence of social technology as opposed to other distinct forms of technology, since “all technology is social” and therefore there is no non-social technology (2011, p. 703), they still propose the term ‘social technology’ as an invitation to study differences, rather than as a category of technologies defined by an essential ‘humanness’. They also make an interesting distinction between technology in general, which modulates social behaviour in some form, and technology that is explicitly designed to modulate specific social behaviour in a certain intended form: “Thus, the concept of ‘social technology’ allows a study of human qualities, without assuming a priori a human essence.” (Derksen & Beaulieu, 2011, p. 706)

Insofar as social media are partly interpreted or understood as cultural or social artefacts or tools that can be used to construct or express meaning and identity or to build engagement and form communities, the serve a purpose as social technology. Through this functional categorisation of social media it becomes possible within this research to draw from research literature in sociology.

Insofar as social media are partly interpreted or understood as technological artefacts or tools that can be used to acquire and develop competences, they serve a purpose as learning technology. Through this functional categorisation of social media it becomes possible within this research to draw from research literature in learning technology.

Within this body of literature I consciously made the choice of restricting myself to research literature in the field of computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) as learning can be considered an essentially social processes that requires interaction and collaboration (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In the research literature that focuses on CSCL, a distinction is made between educational, technological and social affordances (Kirschner, 2002; Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2002). With the concept of ‘social affordances’, a third element is added to the traditional approach to electronic learning environments. Social affordances can be seen as prerequisites that support and facilitate the non-task-related processes and account for psychosocial factors that affect human interaction and collaborative processes.

Social affordances are the social-contextual characteristics of a learning technology that enable social interaction in virtual worlds. According to Kirschner (2002), this involves achieving a ‘mutual dependency’ and a ‘perception-action coupling’ within the design of the collaborative environment.
The social-contextual characteristics of a learning environment, according to Kirschner (2002) are:

- shared understanding;
- responsibility;
- confidence;
- social cohesion;
- predictability.

It is essential that these properties are actually perceived by users (‘awareness’) and that this environment promotes the visibility or conspicuousness (‘salience’) of other users. These characteristics of the environment have been further elaborated by Kirschner, Kreijns, Jochems, & Van Buuren (2004) in measurable factors:

- sociability
- social area
- social presence.

Furthermore, Kirschner, Martens and Strijbos (2004) argue that the design of collaborative environments requires a probabilistic instead of a more classical causal approach, implying that more attention should be paid to learning and interaction processes, following the distinction between processes and outcomes, i.e. the ‘world of learning’ and the ‘world of knowledge’.

In addition to this design approach, Jones, Dirckinck-Holmfeld and Linström (2006) argue that the design activity requires a relational, indirect and participatory approach. The approach should be relational because affordances are not fixed characteristics of a designed artefact but they come to bear through perception and appropriation. The approach should be indirect because a designer has limited influence on the user and the actual use of the designed artefact, i.e. he designs ‘for learning’. The approach should be participatory because involvement of the user(s) is necessary to establish the desired design.

As stated before social media promote new types of media use; analysis of Ito et al (2009) shows that the use of social media has different motivations and involves different styles. Concerning the motivation, Ito et al. found that online engagement is either triggered or motivated by objects or by humans, i.e. interest driven or friendship driven. They further speak of ‘genres’ of participation, indicating the emergence of new forms of literacy. The observations have led Ito et al. to make a distinction in three typical patterns of online behavior:

- Hanging out: aimed at interacting with friends (the Internet as digital personal space);
- Messing around: focus on experimentation (the Internet as a laboratory);
- Geeking out: focusing on the play (as web adventure playground).

Van den Beemt, Akkerman and Simons (2010) propose not to limit the study of interactive media to a one-dimensional view of its use by just looking at the behavioural patterns, following the research of Ito et al. (2009). They also contend for studying the digital or virtual space in which users act and the cultural aspects of the use of media in terms of creating value and meaning. They regard these additional research questions as a second dimension that should be applied in order to study the possible consequences of the use of interactive media for teaching purposes.

They found, among other things, that the intensity and diversity in the use of interactive media shows that not all youth, an entire generation so to speak, show the same behaviour but that different types of users can be distinguished (‘Traditionalists’, ‘Gamers’, ‘Networkers’ and ‘Producers’), who in turn use different types of interactive media. They also stress the necessity of further study of the cultural space in which interactive media are used by asking young people for their opinion.
Social competences

For the operationalisation of this concept, I have drawn upon research literature that focuses on 'social competence' in Dutch education. The first ‘home grown’ definition in the Netherlands stems from Ten Dam and Volman and dates from 1999.

Social competence concerns the knowledge, skills and attitudes that enable a student to function in a society that is constantly changing (Ten Dam & Volman, 1999, p. 27).

Van Erp and Volman (2001), further elaborated the relationship between social competence and social participation or bonding conceptualized as follows. On the one hand, social competence is necessary to engage in social relationships. On the other, young people develop social skills by participating in social relationships. Social competence and social participation therefore maintain a reciprocal relationship.

Based on an impressive literature review, Ten Dam et al. (2003) created a matrix consisting of ‘constituent' components that are classified into three dimensions: the intrapersonal, interpersonal and societal dimension. They explicitly added the third, societal dimension, from the perspective of active participation and citizenship. In addition to these dimensions, the components are subdivided in categories commonly found in definitions of the concept of competence: knowledge, skill, attitude and reflection. They explicitly added a fourth category, reflection, considering the growing importance of reflexivity in human interaction, exercising critical citizenship. This has resulted in a matrix with twelve cells. Ten Dam et al. (2003) refute the approach in which social competence is solely related to observable social behaviour or social conduct. They argue that personal social capabilities and observable social behaviour may not always converge, depending on the specific social-cultural situation or context. Restricting the concept to observable behaviour would ignore the sometimes problematic intricacies of social interaction and the specific role of values and beliefs.

Taking a closer look at Dutch education, Ten Dam et al. (2003) found that schools mainly treat social competence from a psychological developmental perspective, limiting the attention to kids with certain deficiencies. A more active and participatory perspective, promoting active citizenship in young children, hardly occurs.

In my study, social competence is mainly treated from the participatory perspective. The participatory perspective consists of the following three elements:

- social participation (to function in social relationships / communities)
- critical citizenship (flexible interpretation of choices; multi-perspective view on the heterogeneous society; the ability to change perspective and deal with cultural differences and tensions)
- identity development (dynamic concept of the concept of identity, not "finished" after adolescence)

Social capital

The concept of social capital has a short but vivid history. After the bleak vision of American society, pictured by Robert Putnam’s publication "Bowling Alone" (1993), the concept of social capital drew broader attention and was quickly positioned next to human capital, cultural capital and other forms of capital. Putnam pictured the decline of American society, pointing at the loss of substance and cohesion. Although some Dutch sociologists adhered to Putnam’s view, several Dutch sociologists contested his view on society in recent years. They found that social capital increasingly manifests itself at a local community level were its existence and manifestation lies in the hands of individual citizens (Völker, 1999; Duyvendak & Hurenkamp, 2004; Hurenkamp & Tonkens, 2011).
Social capital is considered both a theory and a concept. Within the conceptual framework of this study, social capital is an intended outcome of the use of social media in informal learning arrangements. So the interest is focused on the conditions that shape social capital.

Roughly speaking there are two views on social capital (Völker, 2004). First of all the in micro perspective, social capital is seen as a (instrumental) resource on the individual level whereas in the macro perspective it is seen as the collective potential of a society to function by means of societal institutions and organisations.

Both Woolcock (1998) and Lin (2008) refer to several renowned social capital theorists when they pretend to give a common definition of social capital.

Woolcock:

“the information, trust and norms of reciprocity inhering in one’s social networks’.
(Woolcock, 1998)”;

Lin:

“resources embedded in social networks, or resources that can be accessed or mobilized through ties in the networks (Lin, 2008)”.

Lin states that most social capital theorists agree that social capital is network-based. This means that social capital depends on some type or form of human community or relationship(s). These networks contain or distribute resources, which means that communities are a social force in themselves or that these resources flow or exchange between people within communities.

Woolcock describes the resources in more detail when he speaks of ‘information’ and ‘trust’ as manifestations of social capital that flow within these networks on the basis of norms of reciprocity. He speaks of “one’s” in a singular form as if to say that these networks are personal and of “social networks” in a plural form, thereby suggesting that a single individual can have several social networks.

On the individual level, these resources are considered ‘second-order’ because they cannot be appropriated, claimed or controlled by a single individual; they reside ‘in the other’ and come to bear ‘in exchange’. The factors that determine the existence and quality of social capital are (1) information, (2) trust and norms of reciprocity. In effect, these resources help in achieving goals that could not be achieved in their absence or only at a higher cost. With respect to this function of second-order resources they are often called ‘instrumental’ resources.

On the societal level, social capital can be seen as collective characteristics because they reside in organisations, either institutionalised or loosely associated. The factors that determine the existence and quality of social capital in organisations are (1) norms and values, (2) trust and (3) networks. In effect these characteristics help in producing collective action and achieving collective goals. With respect to this function, these organisations are often called ‘collective’ resources.

Veenstra, Dijkstra & Peschar (2004) argue that this more general understanding of social capital as ‘norms and networks that facilitate collective action’ doesn’t suffice, leaving researchers with a blurred and ‘rather nebulous concept’. They relate the concept of social capital to education through the investigation and determination of the effects of social capital on the educational performance of students. They distinguish two different traditional approaches with regard to the concept of social capital:

- involving collective resources that are available to each member of the community
- involving second-order resources that are accessible or can be mobilized through the relationships that individuals maintain with others in social networks.
According to the authors, especially the first approach has dominated research determining the relation between social capital and education, looking upon social capital as a variable influencing educational participation and outcomes.

Furthermore Völker (2004) states that traditional theoretical discourse on social capital too often relies on presumed causes and presumed effects and also suffers from several methodological problems. She calls out for more systematic study of the conditions and consequences of community building and social capital, limiting the scope of research to local communities or ‘settings’ and thereby focusing on the micro level ‘community question’. Berghouwer and Van Wieringen (2006) suppose that the differences in theories stem from the variance in assumptions about human motives for collaboration and participation. Social capital theorists mostly emphasize the demand side of conditions, i.e. the conditioning of social capital on the basis of personal preference (Völker, 2004). Social capital is also conditioned by extra-individual factors, like the way individuals tend to become interpersonally tied by taking part in activities organized around foci (Feld in Völker 2004) or the way community values are enacted as a result of local discourse about trust and norms (Strawn in Knipprath & De Rick, 2007).

Within the network-based approach social capital is conditioned by three related factors (Flap, 2002; Lin, 2008):

- the number of people from the network that are willing (or required) to provide support (network size);
- the location within the network
- the strength of the ties;
- the nature of the resource to which one can give or get access.

Social capital has been studies extensively in relation with education, starting with Bourdieu and Coleman, taking either a more inward ‘bonding’ perspective or an outward ‘bridging’ perspective (Berghouwer & Van Wieringen, 2006). Within learning arrangements, conditions for the creation of social capital are:

- an outward, ‘bridging’ perspective, offering different contexts for young people to engage in;
- opportunities to build functional communities (‘of practice’, ‘of learning’, ‘of inquiry’) (Berghouwer & Van Wieringen, 2006);
- social competences (Dijkstra, Veenstra & Peschar, 2004), so young people know how to interact and engage in local discourse within functional and value communities (Strawn in Knipprath & De Rick, 2007);

Furthermore it is important to start with building trust in young people, as Huang, Maassen van den Brink & Groot (2009) found that social trust exerts a stronger effect on social participation than the other way around. Another important finding by Veenstra et al. (2004) is that network connections and intergenerational ties between teacher and student, lead to a more positive result than collective resources.

**Context analysis**

Both education and youth policy in the Netherlands are characterized by a high degree of concentration on the care for children that experience problems across childhood (Winter, 2007; Bronneman-Helmers & Zeijl, 2008; Zuidam Kloprogge & De Wit, 2009) with a strong focus on risk factors (Hermanss, 2007). The recent economic crisis and several labour market studies have shown that underqualified youth are the most vulnerable economic group, being the first to be laid off and the last to find another job. Employers expect even from their future lower educated workers that they posses social and
communication skills, are highly motivated and possess the ability and willingness to acquire professional skills through training (Scholt, Dekkers & Ketelaar, 2010; MASS project, 2011).

First of all, if on a job, ‘quitters’, who are often low educated and underqualified, usually work temporarily in low skilled jobs for short periods in irregular time intervals. These kinds of employees are usually not eligible for learning on the job (Borghans, Golsteyn, The Grip & Nelen, 2009). Second, because of the same circumstances, it has proven to be difficult for the UWV to set up suitable work based learning arrangements in collaboration with local ROC’s. Third, if unemployed and actually registered, the UWV subsequently tries to find a suitable job first, which are predominantly low-skilled jobs. In those cases, the ‘work first approach’ requires no further form of learning or training (Work and Income Inspectorate, 2008). Fourth, many young unemployed people don’t even bother to register themselves. Of the total population of youth in Twente (n = 8840), 78% do not work or go to school and have no basic qualification (UWV & Colo, 2010). Of those 8840 people almost 60% are inactive (De Jong, Van den Berg & Geerdinck, 2010). This means that these 60% are not working, not enrolled in any type of education and are also not on welfare, i.e. registered at the UWV. These percentages are slightly above the national average. Fifth, if young people do learn on the job in an informal way, the results are usually limited to function-specific or job-related knowledge and skills. For these low educated in question, that specific knowledge and those skills don’t contribute to long term employability and don’t increase the mobility on the labour market. Finally, developing oneself through work experience i.e. informal learning, and certifying this experience through APL is generally not applicable for low educated young people (Straka, 2004).

Research also shows that low educated themselves are reluctant and hesitant with regard to undertaking activities to enhance their position and invest in themselves from a long term career perspective. Low educated show little enthusiasm when it comes to mobility, anxiety when it comes to learning on the job (Borghans, Golsteyn, De Grip & Nelen, 2009) and are not involved in lifelong learning (Scholt, Dekkers & Ketelaar, 2010). They also indicate not being interested in the use of social media or deem themselves digitally illiterate (Van Dijk & Van Deursen, 2011). In addition, low educated mainly grow up neighbourhoods with a low social economic status where they find no opportunities to develop social competencies (Berghouwer & Van Wieringen, 2006; Winter, 2004), have limited or no social networks and participate less in civil society (Coumans & Te Riele, 2010) and are therefore susceptible to social exclusion (Eimers & Verhoef, 2004).

With the loosening of the direct link between educational achievement in terms of qualification and positioning in the labour market in terms of job security, the importance of individual’s participatory competencies and career decisions has dramatically increased (Pohl, Stauber & Walther, 2007; Tolsma & Wolbers, 2010). Because of the strong emphasis on labour market participation in both vocational and alternative arrangements for ‘quitters’, one can speak of an "unbalanced educational system" (Hermanns, 2007). Insufficient attention to participatory goals and the underlying participatory competencies (Ten Dam, Volman, Westerbeek, Wolfram, Ledoux & Peschar, 2003) in vocational and alternative arrangements eventually lead to lower social participation, compared with students from general secondary education (Bronneman-Helmers & Zeijl 2008). This was corroborated in a recent international comparative study (ICCS), showing an alarming lack of civic skills of young students (15-16 years) from primary vocational education in the Netherlands (Maslowski, Naayer, Isac, Oonk & Van der Werf, 2010). Next to being economically extremely vulnerable and ill prepared for the future, ‘quitters’ should also be considered socially vulnerable. This seemingly less problematic and vulnerable group, while victim of a vicious circle, nevertheless receives little or no attention from educational institutions (Education Inspectorate, 2007), policymakers (WRR, 2008) and in education research (Ritzen, 2008).
From the above it is clear that the current ESL approach and solutions don’t suffice when it comes to giving ‘quitters’ a chance to improve their economic and social position. Especially when taking into consideration, that the Dutch labour market is increasingly demanding employability and mobility from the 21-st century workforce.

Needs analysis

Based on the needs analysis so far some interesting observations can already be done. These are some data on which decisions can be made on the first several factors from the conceptual framework.

Focus groups with young people

Self sufficiency (intrapersonal dimension)

The sessions with young people revealed their strong sense with regard to their own responsibility when it comes to facing their future. The way how these young people respond and also react on each other, shows that many of them have experienced harsh life lessons. These lessons have shaped their attitude and way of thinking. Although these young people are organised in groups to work on their development under guidance, little use is made of the building of relationships and interacting in social processes. The focus lies mainly on the individual and his of her problems. This impression is reinforced by the interviews with professionals from various social institutions and agencies. In their contacts with their ‘clients’ they also strongly emphasise the importance of self responsible and self sufficiency for their future lives and careers.

Trust in others (interpersonal dimension)

As already highlighted in the previous section, youth are very strongly focused on their own wellbeing and their own personal situation. Establishing relationships with others requires a certain amount of trust that in turn depends on ideas about reciprocity. In new contexts they mostly tend to be cautious and reserved, first looking which way the wind blows to determine the conventions, before they take an appropriate attitude and fitting action..

Social interaction (relationships)

Most young people regard their own environment (family or friends) as their ‘secure’ base for the future. Expanding this circle does not happen spontaneously. Internet and social media are mainly used to play and liaise with existing friends. New relationships are preferably established in the physical world, were one and the other can look each other in the eye. Depending on age, different networks are used (ranging from Hyves to Facebook), preferably to maintain contact with family that are geographically dispersed or live abroad. Few respondents show the experience or age to indicate that it may be wise to invest in others and not just rely on one self. Few project their own experiences and life lessons on others, i.e. usually friends, in order to ward off those same mistakes. Even if they are proud, none of the young people are outspoken or confident enough to set an example for others.

Social Media

Most young respondents show a high degree of distrust, when it comes to profiling themselves virtually and entering into new relationships on the Internet. They question the genuineness and authenticity of what is happening on the Internet and the motives of other Internet users. Some even refute the use of Internet in social life other than the rapid exchange of SMS messages and the like.
with trusted friends and relatives. They are hardly aware of and outspoken about the possibilities that the use of social media could have for their own development and the development of the private network. These young people can give little or no examples social and/or strategic Internet use in their private environment, including parents and siblings.

Focus groups with professionals and middle management

Development of social skills

The interviews with the social professionals show that they mainly emphasize youth’s self-reliance and self-sufficiency. Only few professionals show a larger degree of involvement, trying to stay in touch and supply guidance as long as possible. The main emphasis lies in the provisions on forms of (vocational) training with work engagement. Attention is paid to social skills, but only when deemed necessary because of experienced disadvantages or deficiencies. Without explicit normative or disciplinary intentions, youth are covertly and suggestively pointed to the unwanted effects of certain kinds of behaviour. Yet most professionals consider this a secondary objective. For most of them it is not immediately clear what role social media can play in the development of sociability of young people.

Development of social networks

The professionals recognize the importance of social networks as a social phenomenon and the influence on social interaction and communities. In many a case, young people are asked to draw a sociogram to indicate how many real friends you have. The social networks of young people are often also part the problem area that where young people can make is hard to separate. For professionals, it is not clear what the role of social media when it comes to empowerment of youth and the opportunities that these media to other social relationships come into contact.

Using Social Media

Most professionals indicate that they have little insight on the use of Internet and social media by young people and have little or no knowledge about social media. They do admit wanting to know more about these changes in the lives of young people but indicate that they do not know how to achieve this. Still most of the professionals indicate not being interested in shifting part of their professional attention and activities through intensified use of Internet or social media in a work related manner. This can in part be the effect of the use of computers for administrative purposes, giving the impression of becoming alienated with real human contact. Furthermore, some professionals fear that the work related use of Internet and social media might intrude their personal comfort zone or interfere with their personal life. Another reason is the feeling that if they would start using Internet and social media, it feels like crossing some kind of intergenerational border, as if the Internet is the playing ground for youth. They are also insecure about the question of functioning as a role model on the Internet for troubled youth. Some of them refrain completely from using the Internet and profiling/engaging themselves on social network sites like Facebook or LinkedIn.

Despite the above mentioned doubts and second thoughts, professionals do recognise the potential of the Internet and social media for youth, for example with regard to the development of social competences (developmental function) and the visualization of such competences on behalf of possible employers and educational institutions (portfolio function). Such a portfolio function can also benefit the professionals themselves, when presenting and visualizing their professional approach of and results with youth, thereby raising awareness in their local network. Similar portfolios can also raise the awareness of other troubled youth who seek recognition, understanding
and answers on the Internet. They also see opportunities for the youth in the programs, since the use of social media with the goal of building portfolio’s can lead to forms of collaboration, thereby creating a sense of community. The latter is felt less often and has much to do with the preferred methodology. Finally, professionals also see opportunities within their own professional community to start communicating and collaborating via social media, to share and construct knowledge and share experiences. They also recognize their own responsibility when it comes to the lurking dangers of the internet and social media that young people are exposed to. This is a pedagogical responsibility and role they do professionally adhere to. They find it hard to differentiate these quite opposite effects of the Internet in their own approach.

Conclusion and discussion

First insights and results based on context and needs analysis provide an encouraging picture in that they constitute a confirmation of the theoretical concepts and the explanatory power of the conceptual framework.

The dilemma that presents itself is that the youth needs analysis, shows a high degree of rejection the use of social media for the development and profiling of the self and the broadening of the social networks. Although this corresponds to data from the literature, it also shows that the results of the needs analysis are for the greater part determined by frame of reference of those who find themselves in the problem context. In other words, as long as youth are not aware of the social and strategic potential of social media, they will not see this potential as part of the solution to their own problem situation. There should immediately question whether and to what extent in this study there can and should be a ‘weighting’ of design principles, which theoretical insights and results a prescriptive nature and the questioning of the context and partners descriptive.
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