

THE POTENTIAL AND THE CHALLENGES OF THE OPEN WEB IN THE DOCTORAL JOURNEY: THE GOAL ORIENTATIONS OF ITALIAN AND UK PHD STUDENTS

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This paper is concerned with the exploration of the motivations of individual Italian and UK doctoral researchers dealing with the potential and challenges of the open Web in their doctoral journey. The paper takes cue from the peculiar situation experienced by current PhD candidates, who are challenged to act more as 'doctoral researchers' rather than as 'doctoral students' and are increasingly exposed to the unprecedented opportunities of the Web 2.0 tools and services for improving personal development and practicing innovative scholarly activities. The study assumes that the new learning scenarios for doctoral education should be more permeable to the emerging forms of knowledge production and distribution and should look at doctoral researchers' current self-organized practices in the digital as an informed basis to critically innovate research training. Building on selected, qualitative findings drawn from a wider research, this paper provides a snapshot of drivers, hindrances and concerns characterizing the digital engagement of two non representative samples of individual doctoral candidates. Focus of this paper is on the dispositions of the PhD students toward the open Web, as arising from the free comments received in the initial, exploratory online questionnaire delivered across three Italian and one UK universities. Data triangulation has been applied across diverse contexts, according to the grounded theory principle of the constant comparative method. This approach has allowed us to assess the empirical categories of Benefits, Criticalities, Inhibitors and Individual Perspectives, that respectively summarize the accounted advantages, the factors that are likely to prevent or slow down the uptake of new digital tools and the stated individual views about the role of the digital in the doctoral journey.

It has also scaffolded the identification of a set of PhD researchers' Goal Orientations toward the open Web. The Italian and UK survey respondents similarly see the open Web as an efficiency-enabler of the scholarly tasks and share the same critical issues (e.g. lack of legitimation, privacy, copyright, etc.). However, we have noticed the prevalence of a pragmatic approach among the UK PhD researchers, whilst the Italian ones in places push forward the benefits of the open Web as enhancing the quality of the research environment as a whole. Thus, the conceptual analysis of the open comments has allowed us to sketch four clusters of different individual dispositions (Goal Orientations) toward the potential of the open Web: Pioneering (aiming at exploring new digitally-mediated practice), Coping (dealing with the digital on the basis of occasional needs), Waiting for the mainstream (slowing down engagement because of reluctant academic context) and Rejecting (judging the open Web as irrelevant for research work). Among the differences, in the Italian sample the Pioneering approach seems to imply an ideology-driven attitude, in which the individual feels to be part of a collective movement towards not-yet-defined ways of doing and communicating research. Otherwise, the UK sample lets emerge a peculiar relevance of individual agency for future engagement in the 'digital' as the doctoral journey advances. Moreover, the 'Waiting for the mainstream' disposition is clearly shown only among the Italian participants, whilst among the UK participants the trustful attitude toward the institutional asset of the doctoral experience is linked to a strong sense of personal responsibility in the endorsement of the new clusters of digital tools and practices.

To sum up, the results suggest that the current learning scenarios provided by doctoral programs hardly consider the possible, fruitful relationship between the PhD students' self-organized forms of assistance and the institution-led research training's methodologies. In fact, the PhD researchers involved in the study actually struggle in reaping the benefits and face the challenges of the Web 2.0 and social media, only relying on individual enterprise and occasional experiences and aiming to be somewhat supported by the local formal context.

As conclusions, the suggested line of interpretation of the four Goal Orientations deserves additional investigation to gain insights on the contextual factors (e.g. presence of social media training, adoption of networked practices by the supervisors, etc.) affecting the motivations of individual PhD students researching in diverse subject areas and different national settings. The accurate mapping of the assembling activities carried out by newer researchers between institution-led and self-organized digital opportunities can help to prefigure new learning scenarios for the PhD students, where the use of Web 2.0 tools and social networks in particular can support existing practices as well as unprecedented pilots in knowledge production and distribution.