Mobile-mediated home-school partnership: attitudes and expectations of teachers, parents and students

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In the past decades, mobile communication has been one of the fastest growing businesses in the world. In Italy, like in others European countries, there are more mobile phones than inhabitants. Everyone is able to use a mobile phone (contrary to a computer, the simple training necessary to use a cell-phone is done quickly and informally). Mobile communication has become an important part of our everyday life. In schools, mobile phones are generally considered to be a nuisance; but given their pervasive diffusion, they could also be used as a means to foster parent-teacher communication. In our paper, the results of three focus groups are presented, showing different and sometimes conflicting expectations and attitudes of teachers, parents and students toward a mobile-mediated home-school partnership.

Introduction

In the last few years extraordinary growth has taken place worldwide in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and especially in the ICT sector tied to mobile communications, as is evidenced by the more than one billion mobile phone handsets sold around the world in 2006. An increase of 25 percent on sales was recorded a year earlier, according to a study published on January 2007 in Paris by the Strategic Analytics research company. The study forecasts a growth of 12 percent in sales for 2007 thus establishing a new record of 1.14 billion units in mobile handsets sales (Stategic Analytics, 2007). Worldwide, there are more than 2 billion mobile communication users.

Mobile and lightweight devices, that are sometimes small enough to fit in a pocket or in the palm of one's hand, are part of everyday life. Typical exemples of mobile devices are mobile phones (also called cellphones or handphones), smartphones, palmtops and handheld computers (Personal Digital Assistants or PDAs). These technologies are having an impact on teaching, learning, work and leisure.

Recently, mobile telephone prices have fallen sharply and their functionalities have increased. In the United States 40% of students from primary and middle schools, 75% of high schools students and 90% of university students have a mobile telephone. It is expected that in the near future all American students will have a mobile telephone (NOP World 2005). These data have to be read in the light of the fact that at present the United States and Canada are the only countries where the number of Personal Computers is still higher than the number of mobile telephones, whereas in the rest of the world the number of mobile phones exceeds the number of personal computers. In Italy the number of mobile phones is higher than the number of inhabitants, which means that many people have two or more phones each. Very recently the data concerning the spread of telephone lines and contracts for mobile telephones in Europe were presented in an Italian newspaper with a nationwide circulation (Fontanarosa, 2007).

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Country	Telephone lines/100 people	Mobile phone contracts/100 people
France	56.6	68.0
Germany	65.7	78.5
United Kingdom	59.1	91.2
Spain	42.9	91.6
Italy	48.4	101.8

In Asia the number of mobile phones keeps on increasing: in Hong Kong and Taiwan the number of mobile phones is superior to the number of inhabitants (Simon 2004); already in 2001, J@pan Inc. magazine reported that more than 90% of the students in Japanese high schools had a mobile phone. Since 2002 in Botswana, one person in four has owned a mobile phone (Central Intelligence Agency 2005). "*When you lose your mobile phone, you lose part of your brain*", was said by a Japanese student and reported by Marc Prensky (2004). It indicates an assiduous use of the new technologies, which have now become an integral part of daily life.

The widespread diffusion of mobile phones together with the slower but continuous spread of other mobile devices like the PDA, on one hand have opened the road to an interesting area of theoretical and applied research relative to the use of these new technologies for didactic purposes (it is the so-called "mobile learning"); on the other hand they have obliged the educational world to meet daily and sometimes heatedly discuss the new reality of the technologies of mobile communications. Therefore, it is inevitable that even between parents and schools the ubiquitous mobile phone becomes an issue for discussion. Since they have entered the school, there are many proposals for using them, also for school and family communication.

In Italy, but not only there, mobile phones are the center of attention from the media for the episodes of bullying that have pushed the Minister of Education to prohibit their use in schools. On March 15, 2007, the Minister of Public Education, Giuseppe Fioroni, issued guidelines for their use in school with relative disciplinary sanctions. In synthesis, the innovations from the guidelines issued by the Minister of Public Education are the following: the use of mobile phones by students during the didactic activities is prohibited. The prohibition is derived from the obligations found in the Charter of Students (D.P.R. n. 249/1998). The violation of this prohibition creates a disciplinary infraction by which the school is held to apply appropriate measures. It is confirmed that the applicable disciplinary measures must be identified by each independent scholastic institution for their internal regulations in order to rigorously and effectively guarantee respect for the rules, the Law and civil society. Schools are called to verify that the regulations of the institute contain suitable measures which are consistent with what is foreseen by the laws in force. The Ministry will publish examples of regulations for schools on the Internet site of the Ministry of Public Education (http://www.pubblica.istruzione.it).

The prohibition of using the mobile phone during learning and instructional activities is valid also for the teaching staff, as already foreseen by a previous ministerial circular (n. 362 of 25 August 1998). Thanks to the outline of the prepared normative modifications which the Minister of Public Education undertakes to propose to the Council of Ministers, simplification and greater speed in the procedures for the infliction and the impugnment of the disciplinary measures will be introduced. In cases of particular and extreme gravity, where there are criminal or dangerous situations for the safety of other people, also referable to episodes of physical or psychical violence or to the serious phenomena of bullying, it will be possible to apply, followed by the approval of the proposed normative modifications, more rigorous measures that can also lead to the non admission to the final evaluations or to the State examination of the course of studies. The introduction of the normative is announced in advance and gives each school the possibility to ask families to underwrite a "social contract of co-responsibility" towards their own children at the beginning of the school year. This agreement will contain a shared definition of rights and duties between families and school.

In light of all this, it has seemed interesting to see how the discourse relative to the mobile phone is articulated by its protagonists. In fact, as it often happens for everything which is closely tied to what has become object of the attention of the media, the relationship between parents and schools mediated by mobile phones is an argument which lends itself to contrasting interpretations. There are those who would like to abolish this opportunity, and to go back to school "of the olden days", where teachers and parents exclusively used the agenda, paper communication and face to face meetings in order to communicate. And there are those who on the contrary propose, as an example, to extend the electronic registry by transforming it into an extensive control network, with an almost Orwellian character, where the parent is informed of the eventual absences, delays and grades of the child in real time via SMS, in order to be able to be always informed about the child at all times. The research for this paper intends to focus on the problem, by giving space to some of the key actors involved: teachers, parents and students.

The Research

The aim of this work is to reconstruct a picture of this field through the direct involvement of several actors from the Donatelli Scientific High School (Liceo scientifico Statale R.Donatelli-B. Pascal, http://www.donatelli-pascal.it) in Milan with the goal of understanding if and how the new mobile technologies can be used in order to mediate the relationships between schools and parents. We have chosen a high school because here the percentage of students who own a mobile phone is higher than in lower secondary or elementary schools; moreover, many episodes of mobile-mediated bullying reported by the media happened in high schools; last but not least, children of this age often have conflicts with parents in their process of becoming autonomous. To this end, the discourses of the participants for what regards the new mobile technologies have been analyzed in order to mediate the relationships between the school and the parents, leaving the possibility of discussing more general topics to the parent school relationship. Three focus groups have been created composed of: teachers, parents and students.

The main hypotheses we wanted to check are the following:

1. Parents probably welcome a mobile-mediated communication with the school, and they expect to gain better control over their children with this kind of cheap and quick "electronic relationship" with the school.
2. Teachers could accept a mobile-mediated communication, provided that this organizational change does not negatively interfere with their work.
3. Students are probably afraid that this real-time communication between school and parents could become a way to strictly control them.

Method

In agreement with the theoretical principles of the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), a qualitative approach to research was chosen and carried out using the focus group technique. The focus groups were constructed in order to listen to three of the main actors of the school community: teachers, students and parents. Unfortunately, we did not have the opportunity to meet other important stakeholders in school functions, i.e. the technical and administrative staff, who play a relevant role in the daily routine, and are involved in all organizational changes; this will be done in the future.

In March 2007, at the Donatelli school, three focus groups where created in which students, parents and teachers took part. Each of the groups was composed of a single "category" of participants, in order to allow free expression of thoughts in a familiar and informal environment. All participants were recruited on the basis of voluntary participation. This selection criterion implies that the teachers and parents who participated in the focus group where those who participate in the life of the school more actively. The same is true for the students: those who participated in the focus group were the class representatives. In the case of the students, the criterion of selecting students attending different school years was also used. On 6 March, 2007 nine teachers were present (eight women and one man; by the way, this gender distribution of teachers reflects the real distribution of teachers in Italian schools). On 10 March 2007 seven students (four boys and three girls), were present in the first focus group; the second focus group also organized on the same day was attended by eight parents (five women and three men).

The groups met for 60 minutes each, and were lead by a moderator with the presence of an observer, who took field-notes during the development of the focus. All meetings were video recorded with the consent of participants; the recordings proved to be very useful for the analysis of the content.

The main points during the focus groups were: 1. How do you see the parents-school partnership? What is its purpose? How is it now, how you do you wish it were? 2. How do you see mobile communications in school-parents relationships?

Results

The results are presented in the following order: opinions of students, teachers and parents.

From the standpoint of students, cellphones are seen as indispensable elements of their everyday life: "The world has changed. Today it is impossible to live without a mobile phone. I do not know anyone who doesn't own a mobile". It is true that "from a theoretical point of view, it is forbidden to use at school", but all participants admit that their cellphones are always on with vibration under their desks, in their schoolbags, or in their pockets.

Students are somehow ambivalent regarding home-school connections: on one hand, they are afraid to be limited in their freedom about bad marks at school ("in some cases, students are grounded at home if they get bad

results from school"). On the other hand, they recognize that "it is correct if families are kept duly informed". For what concerns the utility of school-family relationships, they think that "what teachers say to our parents are also the same things they say to us; then, it is useful if we want to improve, otherwise, no". As a matter of fact "if you are more controlled, without too heavy punishments, you start studying, or decide together with your parents that you need some extra tutoring… but if you don't agree, there is no way they can force you to study".

Speaking of school-family communications mediated by new technologies, it is clear that the "indispensable" cellphone is no longer a good thing when it is used to communicate behind students' backs. For instance, they "don't like" the idea of communicating with parents via sms that a student arrived late at school. Regarding the possibility of communicating marks via cellphone, they object that "there is the student's report book already". They consider the use of cellphones as a violation of their privacy and an intrusion in children-parents relationships. "I have a very good relationship with my parents, if I get a bad mark I just tell them, it is not a tragedy, but sending a bad mark via sms is intrusive in our relationship". For what regards the theme of bullying, "the problem is not filming the bullying, but is the bullying act in itself that is wrong".

Parents complain about the lack of communication from the school. For instance "they (the school staff) gave the announcement of the beginning of a new computer class during the hour dedicated to religion, attended only by half of the class. Thus, children who do not attend religious instruction missed the first lesson. And these computer classes are one of the advantage points of the school". There is also a problem regarding the training of the school personnel: "the school has a lot of infrastructures, but these facilities are under-utilized, because the personnel is not able to use them". "The school has a website, but it is not updated. The secretary should update it with the news, but she doesn't do that". There are also problems in the communication among the group of parents. A parent, representative of his child's class, says: "I have tried to collect the email addresses of the other parents in the class; it took me three months to collect 70% of them. For what regards the remaining 30%, I have the email of their children. I send my emails but receive no answer. This keeps up with the general low level of parental interest about school". And a mother added: "I am disappointed with other parents for their low participation. We representatives are always the same people: there are two categories of parents". "There is a trend of decreasing parental involvement from elementary school through lower secondary to higher secondary

school, because our children are adults already or, rather, it is convenient to say they are adults". In short, new technologies, such as mobile communication technologies, could help school-parents and parent-parent communication, but the necessary prerequisite is the will to communicate. A good idea of how mobile communication technologies could ease these relationships is to send an sms to announce the arrival of an e-mail, or the exit of students earlier than the scheduled end of the school day. Cellular phones are better suited than PCs in doing these tasks, because everyone owns and uses a mobile phone (but the same is not true for PCs).

From the point of view of teachers, cellphones are useful to quickly contact parents in case of unforeseen events which require urgent information. Surely, one of the main concerns of teachers' work is the fact that they are responsible for children: "in this place, mobile mediated communication means safety, since Italian school really stresses the problem of teachers' responsibility for students. As a substitute for the headmaster, I often have to call parents in order to permit a late entry or an early exit if they don't have a written permission signed by parents, here it is a widespread practice.[…] parents often forget to send a written authorization, and then I often call peopole on their mobiles […] on the home phones nobody ever anwers".

Of course, parent-school communication cannot and should not be confined to a phone call or an sms: "I can call a parent on his mobile to fix a face to face meeting". "I think that the school-family partnership is important for what regards learning achievements but, even more, for the the growth of children […] unfortunately in this school contacts with parents are rare, even if you call them, they don't come. The important thing is contact vis-à-vis between teachers and parents". "For the majority of families communication is just a piece of paper with a notice. A minority of parents, on the contrary, ask for a continuous, omnipresent communication; it's a sort of obsession for them".

Although mobile-mediated communication can provide an easy and quick way to get in touch with parents, teachers signal a strong risk of escaping educational responsibilities: "the problem of technological instruments in our society (and especially in schools, where an educational relationship is supposed to exist) is that the instruments have two aspects: one aspect has to do with control, the other with communication. Control is functional to a certain procedure, and a procedure is just a series of steps automatically leading to a certain result; on the contrary, communication does not automatically bring a result, but rather aims to build something, for example, 'education'. A procedure of sending an

sms in case a student is not at school covers me in case of accident: if there is a trial, I can demonstrate that I have diligently followed the procedure, I checked if the child is present, I sent the alert message to the parents, my job is done, and everything is all right. It could be that the child is dead, but everything is all right for me and for the school [...] our school has a certified system of Quality Assurance, in this crazy world that keeps running after a series of purely formal protection measures, which sometimes don't certify us of anything [...] Technology is just functional to the whole system, it speeds everything up, sometimes in the wrong direction". "It is important to rethink the specificity of our teaching action. I would like to see a really 'human' relationship with students and parents, where technology is just another instrument of communication, that is useful because it is simple and quick, but sometimes it simplifies too much, narrowing the emotional sphere where learning and education take place".

Of course, teachers are well aware that students are frightened by the possibility of becoming subject to excessive control, and agree with them: "I would not stress this possibility of real time communication very much. School and family should remain two different realities. We often complain because our children 'don't grow up', but often growth takes place in solitude. Our contemporary society, 'Big Brother style', where everybody is present everywhere, does not foster children's taking on their responsibilities. It is vital that children have their moments of non-communication; school is school, Mom is Mom, a different thing."

Conclusions

From the results of the focus groups it is clear that the mobile phone is perceived as a good tool for quick and urgent communication, like the communication required to inform parents of a sudden change in programs or to organize a face to face meeting, but school-home communication is much more. To promote and foster school-parent and parent-parent communication it is not sufficient to introduce new technologies, training the school staff to use them; the fundamental starting point of all communication is the desire, or at least the availability of all partners to communicate.

Moreover, new technologies have to be carefully monitored, because there is the perceived risk of reducing communication to an aseptic procedure, designed to avoid responsibilities. Surely, the strongest opponents of parent-school communication mediated by new technologies are the students, who believe that cellphones are absolutely indispensable in their everyday lives, but at the same time feel that their use in the school-family relationship is a real violation of their privacy and an intrusion in the child-parent relationship.

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