

## An Approach for Supporting Hybrid Learning Communities: The Case of a Regional Parent Community

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**Abstract:** This paper presents an approach for supporting regionally bound hybrid learning communities combining traditional face-to-face elements with web based media (online community platform, content recommendations, email and SMS newsletters). The main idea behind this approach is to make use of synergy effects based on a tight connection of online and offline aspects. The proposed approach was piloted in the Mobile2Learn project, a regionally bound parent community, in order to motivate and support (especially hard-to-reach underprivileged) parents to educate their young children.

### Introduction

Early childhood education lays the basis for later (educational) success. Particularly the education and development of children below three years of age is of tremendous importance (Becker & Becker, 2008). One obvious way to support early childhood education is to directly interact with children, either with or without technology (Yelland, 2005). Another feasible way to improve early childhood education is to motivate, encourage, and support parents to educate their children. Parents have a major influence on the early childhood education of their children since the family is the first and most important education authority in the first years of children's lives (Büchner, 2003). Traditional face-to-face trainings are well established and have shown to be an effective way to educate parents. Here, trainers and trainees know each other, trust can be established, and trainers can adapt to their trainees needs easily. However, those trainings do not scale and are problematic regarding participation of underprivileged parents (Bauer & Bittlingmayer, 2005). With the advent of the social web, several internet online parent communities emerged where parents can get access to educational resources and can also interact with each other. Contrary to local face-to-face trainings, interactive online trainings and platforms scale better, provide a low-threshold access to educational resources, and allow parents to get in contact with each other easily. Nevertheless, most online trainings and platforms are not regionally bound, the users are distributed (thus it is hard for trainers to adapt to parent's needs) and often totally lack professional pedagogic support. Specific research on parent communities is missing – despite the fact that several online parent communities are established (like [eltern.de](http://eltern.de) or [community.parents.com](http://community.parents.com); with the described shortcomings).

In order to fill this gap, we propose a hybrid community approach which combines the advantages of face-to-face trainings with the advantages of an interactive online platform. In our approach, the online and offline aspects of the community are tightly connected to each other (e.g., via regular email and SMS newsletters informing about local face-to-face events). Our main goal is to show that this hybrid approach is more effective than the two components separately and that synergy effects occur in the sense that face-to-face events promote the online platform and vice versa.

Using community based approaches in educational contexts is, in general, not a new approach. Typical examples of hybrid communities can often be found in school or university scenarios, connected to terms such as “extended classrooms” or “blended learning”. In a university context, Harrer et al. (2006) allowed students to use a wiki and discussion boards (in conjunction with a presence lecture) in order to work on group projects. They found that none of the two communication forms proved to be superior, however, a combination produced better results (according to final grades). Also, in a related study of Koch (2003), email notifications and newsletters were found to be a key feature of their community platform.

### Mobile2Learn: A Hybrid Community Approach

Mobile2Learn is a small parent community which is based on the proposed hybrid community approach and which focuses on early childhood education topics. The Mobile2Learn project was started by the community college Goslar (an institution for rural parent education) and Clausthal University of Technology. The online community platform was launched in November 2010. As early as this date, users found a small number of 30 articles on that website and the first face-to-face events took place. The project (funding) ended in February 2012. Even though the project was aimed at reaching underprivileged parents, the community website and the face-to-face events were advertised and accessible for all parents without any costs or fees.

The educational activities were structured into six areas (e.g., “learning with all senses”, musical education, nature discovery, and “speaking and listening”). For each area (except “nature discovery”), six different regional kindergartens in the district of Goslar were chosen where thematically related events were conducted. All parents were invited to attend (not only parents whose children attend the facility hosting the

event). While focusing on parents, the events/trainings were designed in a fashion so that parents could attend along with their children. Goals of the face-to-face events included that parents could get to know each other so that trust could be established, and that trainers could meet the needs of the parents and could get direct feedback.

In addition to the face-to-face events, an online community platform was available (<http://www.Mobile2Learn.de>). This platform enabled parents to get in into contact with the Mobile2Learn project and community (anonymously) with low threshold. The online platform provided educational articles, photo galleries and interactive quizzes. All articles and photo galleries could be rated with one to five stars (dislike to like) and could be commented on by community members. Forum posts and a few articles were available for reading without registration on the platform to motivate parents to register. A registration in the system was required, however, to access most articles, all photo galleries, user profiles, and to post ratings, comments or forum threads. For registration, users had to enter an e-mail-address, mobile phone number (optional), nickname, date of birth, gender and residence.

Most of the articles and photos on the platform were provided by pedagogues, but it was possible for registered parents to submit their own articles or photos (reviewed by pedagogues before publishing).

Through the hybrid approach, a mutual support of both the online and offline aspects of the community was aimed at: After all events of a thematic area were conducted, photos taken and articles about the contents of these events were put online. As such, parents who participated could look up all contents and also find further information. Moreover, parents who did not attend any events could view the photo galleries and educational resources, thus could getting motivated to attend events in the future. In addition to this material about face-to-face events, the community platform also included a forum and an internal messaging system. This way, parents who had met face-to-face could easily stay in contact with each other online (cf. Haythornthwaite et al. 2000).

A key factor of the online platform was that personalized messages were sent to parents via SMS and e-mail regularly in campaigns. Between April 2011 and February 2012, such messages were sent approximately every other week. These campaigns informed parents about upcoming events, (new) articles or pictures. Also, automatically generated personalized recommendations were included on the homepage (for registered users) and in all e-mail campaigns (cf. Strickroth, 2012). This direct and repetitive way of contacting community members was chosen to continuously and actively “push” information about educational opportunities to parents. This way, parents were regularly reminded that the project still exists and could easily access all new and “interesting” items – we expected this to be a vital factor for the success of this community.

## First results and outlook

Our approach was piloted in a field study over more than one year. At the end of the funding period, the total parent community consisted of 505 parents who got into contact with the Mobile2Learn project. 234 of these registered on the online platform (46 %). In total, 182 educational articles (plus 14 articles by partners) and 6 quizzes with 28 questions were created and published on the online platform (as of September 2012). Additionally, 51 photo galleries (one gallery for face-to-face event plus several additional thematic galleries) containing approximately 3000 photos were available on the platform.

Preliminary results allow assuming that using the hybrid approach more parents could be reached. Parents seem to be used to email-newsletters and are quickly reachable using this communication channel. Also there seems to be a strong correlation between campaigns and access peaks on the website. Next steps are to analyze collected usage data and the results of a paper-based questionnaire which was sent to all members of the community.

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