

Moblogging as Face-Work: Sharing a “Community-Moblog” Among Project Members

Fumitoshi Kato

Keio University
5322 Endo, Fujisawa
Kanagawa 252-8520, Japan
+81 466-49-3619
fk@sfc.keio.ac.jp

Aiko Shimizu

Keio University
5322 Endo, Fujisawa
Kanagawa 252-8520, Japan
+81 466-49-3619
aico@sfc.keio.ac.jp

ABSTRACT

Over the past few years, our learning environment is changing due to the advent of new information and communication technologies. One of the most important and interesting issues is to explore the ways in which we select and/or combine different modes of communication, such as face-to-face communication (FTF) and computer-mediated-communication (CMC). Concurrently, when we consider that our learning process is situated, it becomes of interest to understand the characteristics of informal channels of communication within a context of learning. The present paper reports on our attempt to share a “community-moblog” among project members. It points to the issues of emerging rules and conventions among project members, and of individuals’ attempts to manage their sense of personhood within the social relationships. This paper suggests that moblogging can be understood as a form of talk through which one can present images of self to others.

Keywords

Camera phones, moblog, organizational communication, face-work.

1. INTRODUCTION

Presently, information and communication technologies are transforming the nature of our cultural and social existence through their modification of various aspects of our day-to-day practices. Our attitudinal and behavioral changes may be generated by the processes and consequences associated with the adoption and use of such information and communication technologies. In the context of organizational learning, we have witnessed a growing awareness on the roles and functions of e-mail, mailing-list, or bulletin board system (BBS) in practicing and facilitating collaborative research projects [5]. More recently, it seems that camera phones have gained their “place” within multiple layers of our communication practices. In Japan, a mobile phone is now owned by approximately one out of two people. There is always a mobile phone within one’s reach, and various information necessary in day-to-day activities are now being stored inside the mobile phone. Rather than “calling” someone, the mobile phone is more often used for “transmitting” data, such as text (mail) and images. In particular, the introduction of a terminal with a digital camera function in

November 2000 changed the nature of communication via mobile phone, making it possible to send each other photographs [4] [6].

The present paper reports on the use of mobile phones and their camera functions within the context of an organizational communication. To anchor our discussions, we will use a case of Japanese university setting within which various modes of communication channels, including the use of mobile phones, are organized for pursuing group-based research projects. A series of observations of individuals’ photo-taking with camera phones is conducted in order to explore the roles and functions of visual data in facilitating processes of communication among group members.

2. SHARING IMAGES WITH A “COMMUNITY-MOBLOG”

2.1 Setting

The on-going research was launched in April 2004, by setting up a website (a weblog) equipped with a function that group members can send photos directly from their camera phones. This setting may be called a “community-moblog” to which a registered member can send an image (with a title and annotation, if needed) to present and illustrate one’s day-to-day activities by using his/her camera phone. Approximately 30 students (mostly undergraduate students), as project members, started to use this “community-moblog” while they engaged, regularly, in face-to-face communication in classrooms.

In introducing the site, there were no particular guidelines or instructions in advance on how the members should use this site. They were free to post photos whenever they felt like doing so. Photos sent were organized into a web page, and a series of weblog features such as posting comments and trackbacks, sorting, and searching, were available. A member’s name (or nickname) is handled as a “category” on the moblog, so that one can list and browse a particular member’s photos. In the present setting, registered members could only post entries via camera phones, and could not edit or delete an entry afterwards.

There were two primary interests in setting up the site:

2.1.1 Understanding organizational communication

First, this “community-moblog” can be understood as a research site to explore the characteristics of organizational communication processes. One of the most important and

interesting issues is to examine the ways in which we select and/or combine different modes of communication, such as face-to-face communication (FTF) and computer-mediated-communication (CMC). Concurrently, when we consider that our learning process is situated within our day-to-day practices, it becomes of interest to understand the roles and functions of informal channels of communication.

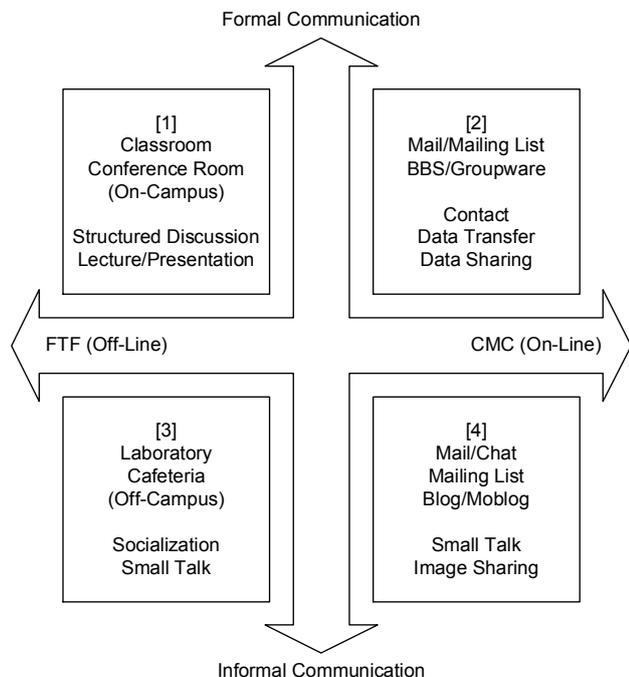


Figure 1. Multiple modes of organizational communication.

As shown in the Figure 1, our day-to-day communication practices are realized through combining different modes of communication. The “community-moblog” site was implemented in order to explore the role of informal, computer-mediated, communication (i.e., bottom-right quadrant), and how it relates to other modes of communication.

2.1.2 Developing a qualitative research method

Secondly, the present study is interested in developing a qualitative research method that utilizes a camera phone, and in particular, to explore the use of camera phones for conducting a field study [2]. A camera phone is a handy and useful “gear” for observing and recording during the fieldwork. Because of the convenience of taking, sending, and publishing the photos, the use of camera phones, may increase one’s opportunity to generate “life documents” [7] [8] within a sequence of daily events. By transferring photos directly from the field, this “community-moblog” can be understood as a group-shared archive of visual fieldnotes. After the fieldwork, a member can reflect upon his/her research by tracing the sequence of photos. Also, because of the other members’ photos are weaved into a stream of visual fieldnotes, one can also learn about how others were involved in the research.

2.2 Data

A primary data source of this report consists of photographs sent to the “community-moblog” during the 12-months period, beginning in April, 2004. During this period, members took approximately 5,600 photos and uploaded to the site. The first step of the analysis began with an observation of the communication process within the website. It focused on the sequential flow of what happened in the process, and when (in what context) it has happened, based on an assumption that several aspects of our communicative behavior can be approached as if they are patterned. The process of organizational communication, as it unfolds, has its own “natural history” of chain of events. It may be said to have a history of its own of which various organizational rules and conventions are a part.

3. COMMUNICATING THROUGH MOBLOGGING

Based on a thorough review of photos, together with ethnographic accounts as one of the users of the system, patterns and functions of the communication via “community-moblog” can be identified [3]. As a set of preliminary findings, there are seven different types of communication that guide the project members’ communication processes.

3.1 Presenting one’s availability

A member communicates his/her availability through posting photos. By revealing one’s location, together with a time-stamp, one can communicate about his/her situation. By simply sending information about where he/she is (e.g., sending a photo of the signboard at a train station), or an indication of where he/she is going (e.g., sending a photo of how he/she is dressed), other members will recognize whether or not the member is accessible. In some occasions, the photo uploaded may contribute to create an alibi, or to make a confession, for a particular member in the group. One can indicate his/her absence in a social event, for example, without directly telling his/her schedule or engagement. Photos of this sort are not only a collection of various places or attire, but also they provide the members with a set of clues to define the situation in relation to others.



Figure 2. Presenting one’s availability.

3.2 Post-hoc explanation

As mentioned, the users (i.e., project members) engage in face-to-face communication regularly both in formal and informal settings. One of the most interesting experiences in sharing the “community-moblog” is that members will become aware that it bridges different modes of communication. A certain posting can be understood as a “preview” of the forthcoming event, while other photo may be a “debriefing” of the event. In this sense, a stream of photos, and a regular browsing of it, may fill the moment “in-between.” For example, on a member’s birthday, one student brought her home-made pie to the classroom. There,

a small celebration took place, in a face-to-face setting. After the event, she posted a series of photos to illustrate the “making” of the pie, a sort of “revealing the trick” after the event. It seems that, occasionally, one decides not to post a photo right away, using his/her discretion in choosing a “proper” timing to disclose the photos to other members.



Figure 3. Baking a pie for a friend’s birthday.

3.3 Live report

Another interesting use of the “community-moblog” is that, in some occasions, a member posts a series of photos as if he/she is telecasting from the site. It is as if there is a web camera that constantly monitors the site. An example below (Figure 4) shows that one student uploaded a sequence of events --- eating a chocolate bar. Even without any annotation, members can recognize the situation in which he is still on-campus and may stay up late to work on his projects. Such an understanding is possible because of the constant use of this system, embedded within the members’ day-to-day communication practices. If a member happens to notice these postings by browsing the website, simultaneously, he/she can send a message or to initiate a chat with him. In this sense, this type of a live report may invite other member’s engagement in the process.



Figure 4. Eating a chocolate bar.

3.4 Calling names

Usually, members tend to call each other by their nicknames. Some photos capture these names found on street signs, price tags, and packages (Figure 5). This type of posting may reflect the ways in which a member understands about the relationships with others, as well as about him/herself. There is always a risk of embarrassing a member by posting this type of photo, so that a decision on whether or not to post the photo requires an understanding about others and self. In other words, the very fact that one can call a particular member by his/her nickname, and to post a photo for other members’ perusal, indicates the nature of their relationship developed through their day-to-day activities.



Figure 5. Calling a member’s name.

3.5 Land-marking

As mentioned, members may indicate their availability by sending photos that show their location. In doing so, there are photos that capture relatively well-known landmarks within the city. As a result, this “community-moblog” functions to compile

a series of landmarks and points of interest. This is, in fact, one of the interesting possibilities to collect, compile, and share images of a local community [2]. It points to the possible contributions of camera phones for a community development, for they may offer experiential learning processes. Phone cameras may play a significant role as a “community-builder,” as a trigger to critically (re)examine the surroundings within which community members are embedded.



Figure 6. Collecting landmarks.

3.6 Personalization

Whereas this “community-moblog” is, by definition, shared among project members, an individual may use it as a personal visual archive. For instance, in collecting various “rainbows” scattered within the city, one member used this site for storage of his data. Because the site is browsed regularly by other members, it triggers their attempt to collaborate with him, and thereby his collection of “rainbows” may become a group project. As a result, he may enrich the entries of his collection. Or, still other member may begin to use the site in a similar fashion.



Figure 7. Personal collectibles: Rainbows.

3.7 Published conversations

Occasionally, it seems that a dialogue between particular members also takes place at this site. It may look like capping verses with visual images, for example. In contrast to the previous example, most of the members, except for the ones concerned, are unable to understand the context of an on-going dialogue. However, acknowledging and following the published conversation, members will recognize the relationships between the ones involved.



Figure 8. Publishing a dialogue.

4. MOBLOGGING AS FACE-WORK

Preliminary findings of the study suggest that the use of “community-moblog” may influence the ways in which project members understand each other. And at the same time, such use of the website may affect the ways in which project members understand about themselves. At the very moment of sending a photograph to the website, an individual member is making a decision on whether or not to allow the photo to appear on the website. That is a decision on what to make available to other members of the group. Therefore, a sequence of photographs uploaded on the website can be understood as a product of an

individual member's understandings about him/herself within the group. Also, through the process of uploading photographs, the distinction between one's private and public domains of activities may begin to blur. That is to say, a constant use of the "community-moblog" may, to some extent, contribute to shape and reshape one's readiness to engage in the process of face-to-face communication with group members. It may expand our tempo-spatial images of a "classroom," for example, and thereby generates a sense of togetherness even when a member's presence is not available.

This "community-moblog" can be understood as a "place" for one's face-work [1]. The notion of face refers to an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes. Through the process of taking and posting a photo, an individual attempts to understand his/her personhood within an organizational setting.

The communication process among project members is relational and interactional. In posting a photo, a member is constructing and maintaining the relationships with others [9]. An individual's postings are not only displaying to other members what he/she has seen, but also, he/she is displaying about him/herself, and his/her understandings about the relationships with other members. By sharing the "community-moblog," members define, redefine, the situation within which they are embedded.

5. A BIO SKETCH

Fumitoshi KATO (Ph.D., Communication) is currently working as an associate professor at the Faculty of Environmental Information, Keio University, Japan. His research interests include: communication theory, media studies, socio-cultural impacts of new technologies, qualitative research methods, and experiential learning theory and practice (e.g., simulation and gaming). He is a faculty member of "Keitai (a mobile phone in Japanese) Laboratory" at Keio University, Shonan Fujisawa Campus, where interdisciplinary studies and research programs on socio-cultural impacts of mobile phones are conducted. He is especially interested in the use of camera functions on mobile phones in the context of our practices of visual communication. Recently, he edited a book (with Rei Shiratori and Kiyoshi Arai), "Gaming, simulations, and society: Research scope and perspective" (Springer-Verlag, 2004).

Aiko SHIMIZU is a master's student at the Graduate School of Media and Governance, Keio University, Japan. She is a member of "Keitai (a mobile phone in Japanese) Laboratory" at

Keio University, Shonan Fujisawa Campus. She is interested in communication behavior via camera phone photos shared by community members. Currently, she is conducting a research on the use of "community-moblog," called "ktaifoto."

6. REFERENCES

- [1] Goffman, E. (1967) *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- [2] Kato, F. (2005) Seeing the "seeing" of others: Conducting a field study with mobile phones/mobile cameras. Presented at *Seeing, Understanding, Learning in the Mobile Age, Communications in the 21st Century: The Mobile Information Society*, Budapest, Hungary.
- [3] Kato, F. (2005, in Japanese) Learning through mobile cameras: On the use of "community-moblog" for a project-based learning. Presented at *JSICR 22nd Conference*, Yokohama, Japan.
- [4] Kato, F., Okabe, D., Ito, M., and Uemoto, R. (2005) Uses and possibilities of the keitai camera. In Mizuko Ito, Daisuke Okabe, and Misa Matsuda (Eds.) *Personal, portable, pedestrian: Mobile phones in Japanese life* (pp. 301-310). Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- [5] Kato, F. and Tachibana, K. (2004) Project facilitation through computer-mediated communication: An exploratory study on collaborative research projects. Presented at the *2nd International Conference on Project Management (ProMac)*, Makuhari, Japan.
- [6] Okabe, D. and Ito, M. (2003) Camera phones changing the definition of picture-worthy. *Japan Media Review* (29 Aug. 2003) <http://www.ojr.org/japan/wireless/1062208524.php>
- [7] Plummer, K. (2001) *Documents of life 2: An invitation to a critical humanism*. London: Sage.
- [8] Plummer, K. (1983) *Documents of life: An introduction to the problems and literature of a humanistic method*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- [9] Van House, N. A., Davis, M., Ames, M., Finn, M., and Viswanathan, V. (2005) The uses of personal networked digital imaging: An empirical study of cameraphone photos and sharing. *CHI2005*.