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SOCIAL LEARNING THEORY IN THE AGE OF SOCIAL MEDIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR EDUCATIONAL PRACTITIONERS

By

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ABSTRACT

Following the research of Albert Bandura, the advent of social media has changed the platform for social interaction and human experience. Educators have a unique opportunity to apply the concepts of Bandura's Social Learning Theory toward enhanced student engagement and learning in a social media context. This article synthesizes current research on Social Learning Theory and Social Media Technology, focusing on how the application of social media in the classroom might be used to stimulate attention, memory, and motivation as each relates to the acquisition of knowledge. Implications for practitioners are discussed in terms of the contexts of student, lesson and faculty.

Keywords: Social Learning Theory, Cognitive Theory, Social Media, Educational Technology.

INTRODUCTION

It is known that people are social creatures. When Albert Bandura first began to champion the notion of imitative responses as a key mechanism in social learning (Grusec, 1992), the world was already well aware that people did not learn in a vacuum. The whole of human experience told a different story, one of interaction and cognitive consequence. If anything can be taken from Social Learning Theory, it is this – for better or worse, people observe, imitate, and model the behavior of others ("Social Learning Theory," 2014). It was true in Bandura's day, and it is truer in the age of social media.

With this understanding, it is unsurprising that technology eventually provided a platform to digitize the nuances of human experience. Though they are not the first of their kind, Facebook, Twitter, and a variety of other services are now synonymous with daily social interaction, and for the first time in human history, all the world is truly a stage. Men, women, and children are players on that stage, and the borders of human interaction and learning have expanded greatly.

What does this mean for the field of education? At any level and in any content area, social media can be used to enhance learning, and it can be used to encourage students to think critically about the technology pervading

their world (Callens, 2014; Tur & Martin, 2015). This new social media paradigm provides a sandbox where imitative behaviors are not only encouraged but are equally rewarded and widely shared.

Purpose of the Study

This study was conducted for the following reasons:

1. To increase the understanding of social learning theory's application to social media in the classroom.

2. To synthesize the current literature on Social Learning Theory and social media, offering suggestions for classroom practice.

Need for the Study

Social learning theory and social media are intertwined, yet current literature has not offered connections between the two or explored how one might enhance the other in a social learning context. By exploring existing literature on both social learning theory and social media, this study sought to draw connections between the two concepts to better understand how social media can positively impact student achievement in the classroom.

Literature Review

Over the past decade, the world has witnessed a tremendous increase in the presence of social media technologies (Kahveci, 2015). A correlative observation

has been witnessed regarding social media's effects on student time, resources, and self-expression. The world has undergone a redefining of modern social structures and an expansion of platforms supporting those structures. In an Educational context, social media challenges traditional assumptions that have long characterized the learning experience of all students (Pavlik, 2015). Gone are the days of one-way communication akin to broadcasting (Vickers, Field, & Melakoski, 2015), for in the age of social media, communication is a two-way, three-way, and hundred-way tool that is interactive, immersive, and omnipresent.

In this interactive social media world, the application of social learning theory presents an opportunity to promote leaps in student achievement, as cognitive concepts of attention, memory, and motivation (Social Learning Theory, 2014) are encouraged by social media. Likewise, these traits are widely sustainable through social media, increasing cognitive processes associated with learning and knowledge acquisition.

Attention and Social Media

Of the variables affecting whether a perceived learning trait or strand of knowledge is internalized by a student, attention is one most affected by an individual's characteristics of sensory capacity, arousal level, perceptual set, and past reinforcement ("Social Learning Theory," 2014). If a social learning activity is to be successful, it must cater to one or more of a student's internal characteristics of perception. For example, teachers often follow procedures for recording attendance in the traditional classroom. If a student's perceptual set, or perceptual expectancy, is attuned such that hearing his/her name snaps them to attention, it can be determined that a certain level of attention is promoted by stating a student's name when engagement is expected. Given this example, consider the possibility of the student being summoned by hundreds of voices across a shared digital space. In this way, social media excels in maintaining a focused interaction between the student and the realm of available knowledge, calling the student back into the social learning context with each like and with each tweet.

Social media provides a toolset wherein attention and engagement are interwoven. Since the act of utilizing social media requires a level of focused attention, students who post a comment, read an article, like a post, or retweet a message are doing so actively. The very nature of online social interaction requires that attention be maintained in order to engage with the content. In this way, social media outlets like Facebook and Twitter provide a platform for sustained attention, allowing for a participatory model that facilitates the sharing of user-generated knowledge strands (Casey & Wells, 2015). This constant call to attention improves learning processes and aids the student in maintaining focus throughout the duration of the learning activity.

Memory and Social Media

Social learning theory provides a bridge between the behaviorist approach and the cognitive approach to learning theory (Social Learning Theory, 2014). With a constant flow of information, it is not enough to simply pay attention to the social context of learning. True learning requires external stimuli and bits of information to be encoded into the student's memory, able to be retrieved and applied to external life situations. Social interaction is a complex system of collaborative parts, each performing a different function that may or may not have an effect on lasting memory. By providing reinforcing stimuli in the form of graphical representations, annotations via peer comments, and the ability to interact with information in a live setting, social media enhances student opportunities for memory creation and memory retention.

In social learning theory, symbolization refers to a person's ability to create mental images and memories based on temporary sensory experiences (Ponton & Rhea, 2006). These temporary sensory experiences are enhanced in the social media context, as a variety of learning styles are engaged through interaction with the social media platform. Social media provides visual and auditory stimuli through the use of graphics, videos, charts, and graphs; and, it provides tactile stimuli through the physical process of interacting with electronic input peripherals. By employing a multisensory approach to information sharing, interactions experienced in a social learning context provide better opportunities for symbolization and

memory creation.

Motivation (Self-Efficacy) and Social Media

Within Bandura's framework for social learning, self-efficacy plays a vital role (Freudenberg, Cameron, & Brimble, 2010). An individual's beliefs about the impact he/she can have upon the world is paramount to realizing that impact. In terms of social learning, students are more likely to exhaust resources toward achieving a social outcome if they believe in their own capacity to achieve that outcome. Consider two high school students at a senior prom: one with high self-efficacy, one with low self-efficacy. Though both may desire to dance, overriding sociological factors of self-efficacy cause each to consider the perceived impact that dancing may have upon social standing. The same analogy translates to classroom engagement and student achievement. If learning is primarily a social endeavor, it is more likely to occur when sociological factors dictate that exhausting resources will result in a favorable outcome.

For social learning to occur, students must exchange knowledge in an interactive environment. In a traditional classroom, however, students still remain isolated from other students, experts, parents, and the community (Mourlam, 2013). This type of restriction inhibits self-efficacy, as social learning requires interaction. Without a platform for interaction, students find themselves critically evaluating the cost and benefit of classroom engagement. Since classroom engagement is a factor in overall achievement and learning, traditional classroom experiences create barriers against the social learning context. It is difficult for students to imitate learning when interaction is limited or completely absent between key role groups within and beyond the classroom.

In contrast to traditional classroom interaction, social media provides a platform for interaction with a variety of role groups in a low-risk environment. Within the social media environment, interactions prescribed by Social learning theory are encouraged, and since digital interactions are detached from many social anxieties, users often demonstrate a higher degree of self-efficacy regarding the experience. This heightened level of self-efficacy may translate to higher engagement, which may result in increased student learning.

Implications and Discussion

For Educators at all levels, the use of social media presents a unique opportunity to engage students in a new paradigm of human interaction and social learning. Applications of social media have been used in the classroom to promote critical thinking and reflection (Daniels & Billingsley, 2014), multiple levels of student involvement (Giebelhausen, 2015), increased student participation and engagement (Graham, 2014), awareness of issues related to race and diversity (Nakagawa & Arzubiaga, 2014), and a sense of belonging to a community of learners (Munoz, Pellegrini-Lafont, & Cramer, 2014). Educators can no longer remain on the fence concerning the use of social media and its enhancement of learning applications through Social learning theory. The literature is rich in discussion concerning the benefits social media promotes toward educating students at all levels.

Student Context

The most immediate consideration for Educators exploring the use of social media in the classroom is an evaluation of the student context. By surveying the social and academic needs of the student group, educators can decide which social media platforms best serve the unique demands of the learning context. For instance, an Educator whose classroom serves low socioeconomic populations should consider the technological needs of all students expected to engage in social media activities. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds may not be familiar with or have access to technologies relevant to the social media experience. Furthermore, a lack of student exposure to relevant technologies should be met with adequate training and accessibility.

The growing popularity of social media outlets have also caused concern regarding privacy and security for student users (Vanderhoven, Schellen, & Valcke, 2014). Educators considering the adoption of social media technologies within the learning context should familiarize themselves with potential hazards to the learning experience. Issues of online harassment, sharing of personal information, and content risks that complicate the digital landscape, so

proper training and precautions should be taken to ensure whether students are safeguarded.

Lesson Context

Hynes (2014) warns about the dangers associated with the fragmented social collaboration required for participation on social media outlets. For this reason, Educators will also need to evaluate the inherent pros and cons of each social media outlet to determine which is most useful in accomplishing a given task. Although most forms of social media promote high levels of student interaction, some outlets may be more adept in meeting the specific needs of the lesson. For example, Twitter allows students to converse and share information in a social context, but restrictions placed upon the amount of characters allowed in a single tweet may not lend itself to assignments where detailed analysis is expected. Conversely, the brevity of communication via Twitter may be ideal for teaching conciseness and clarity when an assignment calls for such actions. Professional judgement should be exercised in deciding which social media platform is best for a given lesson.

In deciding which social media platform meets the needs of a particular lesson, Educators should also consider how the assignment relates to Bloom's Taxonomy (Sylvia, 2014). Higher-order thinking skills are promoted in environments where knowledge is evaluated, challenged, and created. If an assignment calls for a higher level of taxonomical knowledge or engagement, Educators should consider the limitations of each social media outlet alongside the benefits and strengths. Broad availability of social media platforms does not translate to broad applicability to a given learning objective. Educators must become knowledgeable of which platforms provide the best opportunities for student achievement and which contexts maximize the potential of the given platform.

Faculty Context

As with all emergent technologies, growing pains are associated with widespread adoption and implementation. Considerations of varying faculty proficiencies in technology and inclination toward using technology should play a role in the design of social media implementation in the classroom. Some faculty members may adapt quickly to the technology of social media, and others will not. Educational faculty should plan for discrepancies in faculty proficiencies and motivation toward technology and arrange training accordingly.

Regarding geographical context, the literature acknowledges a significant difference between Educators in Urban environments and Educators in Rural environments regarding technological competence and the use of media in the social learning process (Langa, 2015). Research suggests that, Educators in Rural environments have less computer competency than those in Urban environments; likewise, rural educators pay less importance to the use of social media in communicating with various stakeholders than do their urban educator counterparts. These considerations should be taken into account when deciding on institution-specific faculty training protocols and differentiation as it relates to technology competency and the use of social media in the classroom.

Conclusion

Social media technologies have fundamentally changed the way that social interaction occurs within our world. By enhancing the cognitive processes of attention, memory, and motivation, social media provides a platform for improving learning in a social context. If educators can harness the potential of social media, social learning factors may improve, and consequently, educators may positively impact student achievement through the use of modern Educational Technologies. Educators should embrace this paradigm shift, preparing students to accept a role in the great "knowledge exchange" on the world's digital stage.

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