

Chapter 68

Social Media's Potential to Facilitate Dialogic Learning

Jin Yang
University of Memphis, USA

ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the use of social media in educational settings and assesses its potential as a learning tool in facilitating deep learning and knowledge development. Guided by Vygotsky and Bakhtin's theory of dialogic learning, the chapter argues, by discussion, that social media may facilitate deep learning and knowledge development due to social media's convenient discursive space and heightened interactivity. Specifically, social media's discursive space may provide a platform that is egalitarian and democratic to all who have access to it. The breakdown of traditional communication barriers in this discursive space can be significant in engaging students in dialogic learning. Social media's heightened interactivity embodied in social, procedural, expository, explanatory, and cognitive dimensions may shorten psychological distances, lighten class-managing load, expedite learning materials' delivery, expand the learning space without time constraint, and encourage cross-pollination of ideas and viewpoints. The chapter discusses the profound opportunity that social media may have to enhance knowledge development.

INTRODUCTION

Social media or social networking sites (SNS) such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and wikis enable people to socialize, organize, learn, play, and engage in commerce (Rheingold, 2010). Web-based services allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the

system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007). In 2012, 67% of Internet users use social networking sites (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). Specifically, 67% use Facebook, 16% use Twitter, 15% use Pinterest, 13% Instagram and 6% Tumblr (Duggan & Brenner, 2013). A late 2012 survey by the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project found that Internet users under 50 are particularly likely to use a social networking site, and those 18-29 are the most likely of any demographic cohort to do so (83%) (Duggan & Brenner, 2013).

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Though designed for social uses, social media is being adopted and utilized in education settings including higher education (Roblyer, McDaniel, Webb, Herman, & Witty, 2010). Mazer, Murphy and Simonds (2007) studied Facebook use among students and faculty and found, “this network is increasingly being used not only by students but also by faculty” (p. 3). However, students are much more likely than faculty to use Facebook and are significantly more open to the possibility of using Facebook and similar technologies to support classroom work (Roblyer et al., 2010). There are signs suggesting educators are being encouraged to use Twitter to enable interactivity, excite learners, and foster greater student participation (Kassens-Noor, 2012). Just as the print technologies and literacies shaped the Enlightenment, the social media technologies and literacies will shape the cognitive, social, and cultural environments of the 21st century (Rheingold, 2010).

Some early studies on the adoption of social media in higher education have yielded negative findings such as the distractive nature of social media, copyright violations, subversion of asymmetrical relations of power between academics and students, and disruptive technological innovations leading to short attention span (Rambe, 2012b). However, these unintended consequences and inconclusive findings have downplayed the potential of social media to enhance meaningful interactions to facilitate deep learning.

The purpose of this chapter is twofold. First, it intends to review literature on dialogic learning in the context of the essence of learning so that an outline of the theoretical framework of dialogic learning can be presented and a basic understanding of dialogic learning can be established. Second, it aims to discuss how social media have the potential to facilitate dialogic learning from social media's two closely related aspects: discursive space and interactivity. Guided by the constructivist or social-cultural approach to learning and knowledge development that knowledge is learned best from participating in discussions

and from contributing to the knowledge generating, the study proposes and discusses the thesis that social media have the potential to facilitate dialogic learning and thus assist the accomplishment of educational goals and objectives.

BACKGROUND

The Essence of Learning

Various learning theories attempted to explain the essence of learning, i.e., how people learn. While most philosophy-based learning theorists such as Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates emphasized reflection and inquiry as the means of obtaining truth and knowledge (Hammond, Austin, Orcutt, & Rosso, 2001), Socrates developed the dialectic method of discovering truth through conversations with fellow citizens (Monroe, 1925). The medieval (5th to 15th century) conception and the renaissance conception of the purpose of education dissented in the focal point of whether education is for basic skills or for thinking, and that differential digression continued in the modern ideological debates on education (Hammond et al., 2001).

The 19th Century introduced the scientific study of learning and psychology-based learning theories represented by Edward Thorndike (1874 – 1949), B. F. Skinner (1904 – 1990), Jean Piaget (1896 – 1980), and Lev Vygotsky (1896 – 1934). Thorndike believed that learning was incremental and a trial-and-error approach should ensure certain stimuli that would ‘produce’ learning (Hilgard & Bower, 1975). Skinner, believed by many researchers to be the father of modern behaviorism, considered learning to be the production of desired behaviors, and denied any influence of mental processes (Morris, Smith, & Altus, 2005; Ryback, 2012; Wells, 2000). Behaviorist learning theory has had substantial influence in education, guiding the development of highly-sequenced and structured curricula, programmed instructional approaches, workbooks, and other tools (Wells,

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