**A Collaborative and Engaging Learning Environment Through the Use of Social Media**

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Research, articles, blogs, and other forms of communication have stated over the past few years the significance and the importance of the role of technology-supported cooperative learning such as social media in learning communities. Whether these learning communities are in the work place, project based environments, the classroom, or other forms of learning environments; social media has played a role in facilitating the implementation of the lesson, information, and education of the material (Davidove, 2010).

Wikis, social media sites, clouds, and other new technologies all revolve around the idea of collaboration, sharing of ideas, and peer-to-peer interaction. One can classify this phenomenon as a trend, or one can look at collaborative settings as a result of a need to communicate, learn, and innovate together. Tsay and Brady (2010) note that the very nature of cooperative learning is changing as social media outlets like Wikis and Facebook become widespread. Wikipedia defines social media as “the use of web-based and mobile technologies to turn communication into an interactive dialogue”; much like Wikipedia seems to have established itself as an interactive communal forum of information.

This suggests that technology has provided the ability to collaborate and therefore lends itself to cooperative learning. It seems the purpose of technology in education “before the 1990’s used to be based on the single-learner assumption. The individual assumption is that instruction should be tailored to each student’s personal aptitude, learning style, personality, characteristics, motivation and needs ” (D. Johnson & R. Johnson, 2007: 403). As times change, so do the needs of people and organizations. Today, the ‘single-learner’ approach does not seem to apply to a quickly changing, technology heavy population. Social and collaborative opportunities that are readily available through technology, learning, and teaching have enabled the “single-learner” to broaden his or her communication scope in order to approach learning in a collaborative way.

The ultimate goal in any learning environment is to provide effective and useful learning opportunities. Communication, or at least, the transmission of communication is key in establishing an effective learning environment. Dewey (1922) states that society continues to exist because of the transmission of communication from one generation to another. Upholding and maintaining the flow of communication is an important factor in learning from one another.

Social media has been used as a tool in creating a forum for communication and a platform for sharing ideas. In an article from Harvard Business Review, Bradley & McDonald (2011) define social media as “how my peers show me what they think is important, based on their experience and in a way that I can judge for myself.” More popular social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn are used everyday for communicating personal and professional information to peers and “followers” alike. Through posts, followings, invites, and threads of communication, people learn every day. They learn about a fundraiser organized for the weekend; they learn about their favorite stars; they learn about what their friends did yesterday; and so on. If people are learning various types of information through this kind of casual learning, then they can learn any kind of information from each other – socially.

The presence of social media and its integration into the lives of people today is not only evident, but also constantly increasing. Wikipedia has evolved into an online encyclopedia that rivals traditional forms of reference for the masses; LinkedIn serves as a credible substitute for networking and sending out resumes; and Facebook has exponentially replaced the need for phone calls, holiday cards, invitiations, and so much more. Through these and other forums of social media, the way we communicate and the way we acquire knowledge is not only evolving, but has already changed, and as a result is changing how people perceive and approach learning.

Social Media … often creates more powerful and enduring learning experiences; it helps people establish and leverage social connections to accelerate the distribution and sharing of experiences, content, and guidance; and it allows learners to be more productive, learn faster, and work smarter. (Davidove, 2010:p)

Social media’s presence and influence is undeniable. People receive information in a variety of ways by engaging through social media. The potential and impact social media has can greatly contribute to learning, collaboratively and productively.

# Importance of Social and Collaborative Learning

Since the beginning of time, people have acquired knowledge in a variety of ways. Language through parents; habits through siblings and friends; grammar, arithmetic, and sciences through teachers; skills through trained masters; mankind has evolved and thrived because of their ability to learn.

But what is learning, and what is the most effective manner to engage in it? According to Frank Smith (1998), there are two views of learning and forgetting – the classic and the official view. The classic view says, “We learn from people around us with whom we identify” (p. 11). It is continual, effortless, boundless, vicarious, a social activity, and never forgotten. The classic view incorporates the kind of learning we do everyday, without much effort. Most times, individuals are not even aware that they are learning something. They are so engaged in the lesson, project, or activity that they learn without realizing it is being done. On the contrary, the official view states, learning is work, and that anything can be learned provided sufficient effort is expended and sufficient control enforced. Official learning is occasional, limited, based on effort, memorization, individualistic, and easily forgotten. When individuals learn the official way, they are very cognizant of the process of learning. The process of learning is quite intentional and a difficult task. It is work; it is hard; and soon after the information is used for its purpose, it is usually forgotten because there was no real engagement or involvement in the process of learning.

If Smith is correct in these assertions, it is hard to understand why the official view of learning has come to dominate the activity of schools. Most classrooms, teachers, and students engage in practices that Smith describes as the official view of learning and forgetting. Many students are part of a classroom with a teacher ready to learn, in what may appear to be a collaborative setting. There are groups of students and spaces, which might support collaboration. However from my experience, collaboration in classrooms is not the norm. If we learn from those around us with whom we identify, then why are students not learning from one another in the classroom? One reason can be that collaborative learning is not taking place among peers. It is learning structured by the teacher to the student, information and style of implementation decided for the student. Teachers have set clear boundaries and rules that students are expected to follow to succeed. And if one veers off the limits of the set boundaries then failure is sure to follow. Very rarely does learning happen from each other in the classroom because the classroom is not set up in that way.

According to Smith (1998), the classroom should be more like a club where students learn from one another as well as from the teachers. Once you are a member and discover what activities are available to you, more experienced members help you to do things that interest you. They do not teach you; they help you. There is no coercion, nor are there great expectations. No one cares how good you are; you are simply accepted for who you are – a member of a club – and are helped to do what you are interested in doing. You gain security and confidence (1998:18).

It is the setting, the surrounding, and the people we spend time with that fosters learning or the want to learn. Smith says that useful learning occurs during our daily life, not when we take time out from it. Learning happens whether we are ready for it or even aware of it. (p. 13). Learning done for the sake of learning is easily and quickly forgotten. Most learning that is done as a result of hard work is soon forgotten because of the lack of connection and invested interest in the subject or topic.

Learning integrated with other activities as part of one’s regular day, tends to stay with one longer and more effectively. Today’s daily life revolves around social media. Posting on Facebook and tweeting for example, take up most of people’s days on the computer, smart phones, tablets, etc. Our every day lives are engrossed in technology. Communication through technology, specifically through social media, has created a platform for possible engagement, peer-to-peer learning, and education. However, the possibility is not enough, there have to be willing participants to engage in learning. Individuals who participate in social media are usually willing and choose to log on and participate. As a result of this willingness, they will benefit from these possibilities because there is no coercion for them to participate, nor boundaries limiting their extent of participation.

Social Media enables people to break down conventional communication barriers that keep people isolated; thus, preventing them from learning socially or collaboratively. Groups of people have used social media to establish a free forum of communication that extends to people who have access to the technology. By breaking down communication barriers, a new kind of learning has been established, a technology-supported cooperative learning environment. The very nature of technology-supported cooperative learning depends upon social activity and participation. The learners, or members of the group are there voluntarily to share, learn, and communicate about a subject or topic. It is because of their voluntary presence and participation that learning is able to happen in a productive environment. The Khan Academy is a prime example of such voluntary medium. It is a site with over 2,700 videos covering various types of lessons and practice exercises. People visit the site to learn something voluntarily and get feedback through the use of badges that encourage the learners to continue learning and visiting the site. The sense of belonging is key to learning, because it promotes confidence, ease and comfort in sharing, and can create an atmosphere of positive feedback and learning.

# Implementation of Social and Collaborative Learning

Learning through social media can help enhance the learning process; however, there is no one or best way to implement this kind of technology-based cooperative learning into classrooms and curriculum. The way technology, social media, various software and hardware have been used for learning will vary among groups, social atmospheres, learning purposes, and so on. The type of technology used is not necessarily the key factor, but the way it is integrated and utilized in the learning process. Most importantly there needs to be a strategy in place that “should integrate social learning into the mainstream of the organization by aligning it to important goals” (Davidove, 2010). For example, classrooms can use wikis for a collaborative project or a social media site like Edmodo for communication and feedback for assignments. By establishing a set plan for integration of technology, social media becomes the main avenue of communication and learning to achieve the greater good for the organization.

By establishing social media as possible method to accomplish said goals, educators can effectively use social media to achieve their goals – educating and engaging students. Technology becomes one of the vehicles used to accomplish the goal of learning. Smith (1998) warns us of the “dangers” of technology and paints an almost Fahrenheit 451- kind of picture of how technology will eventually make humans or human need obsolete. While that can be a possibility, it does not have to be. On the contrary, technology based practice has demonstrated how human centered design, learning, and engagement requires the input of many people, working together. ”Educators must recognize the potential for improving student engagement in the classroom using these technologies” (Holland and Muilenburg, 2011). If teachers embrace technology, use it to enhance their teaching, not replace it, and embrace all the positive components it has to offer, subsequently a more productive and collaborative learning environment should be established. By creating the opportunity for students to learn what they are interested in or making the learning far more engaging through social media, educators have created an environment where students are learning in the way Smith (1998) says we learn and remember best.

Summary and Conclusions

The presence and influence of social media has taken hold and is an undeniable part of our lives today. People encounter technology in their daily lives and acquire experiences as a result of it. People have already accustomed themselves to learning through technology, through social interaction, and most importantly through a collaborative setting. They communicate with each other, in groups, both synchronously and asynchronously for various reasons.

They key is to learn from each other and through each other’s experiences; but more importantly, the key is to establish a sort of culture where people can choose to join and participate in each others learning. Social media provides a forum for this kind of sharing of experiences and knowledge in an instant kind of medium, taking advantage of the technologies and cultural norms that are available to us today.

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