Chapter 10
Learning, Culture, and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

The influence of social media has been most significant in the way that it has transformed our lives and daily practices, especially the younger generation. Social media usage represents a change in social norms such as values and perceptions, and it affects social movements, causing social and political changes. In this virtual communication process, cultural differences, national identity, and gender issues come forth, which can influence local and global communication behaviours within social media. Based on these facts, in this chapter we aim to highlight how virtual culture plays a role in education, within the social learning context of social media. Thus, social networks and social media will be handled within the context of learning: both from a conventional and online perspective. In light of established learning theories, we discuss what is really going on virtually and how cultural differences affect this process and learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

The influence of social media has been most significant in the way that it has transformed our lives and daily practices, especially the younger generation. Today, most people are using social networking sites to keep in touch with family, friends and acquaintances, developing new contacts (often through ‘friends of friends’ or people with shared interests), sharing content, engaging in self-expression and exploring identity, hanging out and consuming content including commercial and user-generated content, accessing information and informal learning, and participating in informal groups and formal youth engagement opportunities. Social media usage also represents a change in social norms such as values and perceptions, and it affects social movements, causing social and political change. People worldwide now com-
municate, exchange messages, and share their opinions via social media. It is like a global village, where people from different cultures can get together and socialize. It is a form of media that allows people to communicate online without being face-to-face, yet still acting as a group in both a virtual life and real life. In this virtual communication process, cultural differences, national identity, and gender issues are being raised that influence local and global communication behaviors within social media.

Based on these facts, in this chapter we aim to highlight how virtual culture plays a role in education, within the social learning context of social media. We start with a look at the cultural roles played by humans based on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory, and its implications on educational context. We then look at the emergence of digital technologies, and how they have changed our daily practices in a networked society. Social networks and social media will be handled within the context of learning: both from a conventional and online perspective. In light of established learning theories, we discuss what is really going on virtually and how cultural differences affect this process and learning outcomes. The chapter concludes with suggestions provided for instructional designers, instructors and students to cope with the ever-changing nature of virtual learning worlds. We conclude that besides merely providing technology-rich resources, instruction should be designed so as to address the changing nature of communities on the basis of cultural differences, particularly for social learning environments based on social media.

Like other technologies, Internet communication is not neutral, Thorne (2003) states: “The cultures-of-use of Internet communication tools, their perceived existence and on-going construction as distinctive cultural artifacts, differs interculturally just as communicative genre, pragmatics, and institutional context would be expected to differ interculturally” (p. 38). In this process, understanding cultural factors is important in terms of raising awareness of one’s own cultural identity (Martin & Nakayama, 2004). Despite a relative inadequacy of research on cultural differences in social networks and learning environments, several studies have been conducted recently based on Hofstede’s cultural dimensions theory (Gunawardena et al., 2001; Moore, Shattuck, & Al-Harthi, 2005; Uzuner, 2009). In this chapter, understanding and managing cultural differences in social networks and online learning environments are also discussed in light of Hofstede’s framework.

**HOFSTEDE’S CULTURAL DIMENSIONS THEORY**

According to the Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede (1986), our archetypal roles of interaction are played in different ways in different cultures, interacting and carrying themselves over four main human institutions: family, school, job, and community. Hofstede describes them as “part and parcel of the culture” (p. 302) of a society (based on his 1980 definition of culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another”), which are transferred from one generation to the next. These roles are disconcerted in cross-cultural environments, particularly in learning situations where pairs may be born, raised and ‘programmed’ in different cultures before they are exposed to that environment. In his 1986 study, Hofstede describes such cross-cultural learning situations as ‘fundamentally problematic’, particularly in four main areas in terms of differences in social positions of instructors and learners, relevance of the curriculum (training content), profiles of cognitive abilities between populations from which instructors and learners are drawn, and expected patterns of instructor/learner and learner/learner interaction.