Chapter 1
Social Media in Higher Education:
Fostering Learner Engagement
Through a Sociocultural Approach

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a framework for utilizing a sociocultural theory (SCT) approach to design and implement social media-based learning activities intended to foster learner engagement in higher education coursework. The author discusses the current status of social media, especially as used for educational purposes, as well as the documented learning benefits and challenges. This is followed by an overview of SCT, including its key concepts such as mediation, the zone of proximal development, and scaffolding. Building on these key concepts four pedagogical suggestions are described for fostering learner engagement via social media: provide the foundation for a community of practice, design meaningful and authentic learning activities, guide learners’ engagement, and assess learning as a dynamic social process. The chapter concludes with a discussion of suggestions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

Because of the widespread availability of the Internet, mobile devices, and social media tools, we now live in a world that is more interconnected than ever before. In fact, more than three billion people worldwide are actively using various social media tools (Kemp, 2017) to connect with friends, family, colleagues, and countless others from personal, professional, and academic networks. Traditionally, Facebook and YouTube have dominated social media statistics in the U.S.; however, in recent years younger adults and teens have gravitated toward Instagram, Snapchat, and Twitter. Furthermore, 88% of all adults 18 – 29 years old in the U.S. report using social media on a regular basis (Pew Research Center, 2018) to engage with others via text, audio, video, images, and combinations thereof. It is this high level of user

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engagement that distinguishes the more popular tools from others and provides unique opportunities to stay in touch, get up-to-date news, fill spare time, and share information.

Although the ubiquitous nature and significance of social media in our personal lives are easy to pinpoint, the potentialities for such tools to enhance student learning and foster engagement in educational settings are still emerging. Over the past two decades, educators have adopted various social media tools to design and implement learning activities. For example, Chugh and Ruhi (2018) report on 25 peer-reviewed studies that leveraged Facebook for educational purposes. Other publications highlight uses of Twitter (Bista, 2015; Evans, 2014; Kassens-Noor, 2012) and YouTube (Fleck, Beckman, Sterns, & Hussey, 2014; Orús, Barlés, Belanche, Casaló, Fraj, & Gurrea, 2016; Ricoy & Feliz, 2016; Terantino, 2011) in higher education. Thus far, several benefits of employing social media in education have been identified, including but not limited to increased learner collaboration and reflection (Cochrane & Bateman, 2010; Gao, Luo, & Zhang, 2012), increased connectedness with classmates and the instructor (Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Thai, Sheeran, & Cummings, 2019), and increased participation (Evans, 2014; Imlawi, Gregg, & Karimi, 2015). In addition, research in writing studies has identified the potential to reach a broader public audience as a notable advantage for increasing learner engagement (Walls & Vie, 2017). Each of these reports point to overall increased learner engagement of various forms; yet, utilizing social media in higher education also presents notable challenges. In particular, Manca and Ranieri (2017) describe the pedagogical challenges encountered when implementing social media-based activities, including the imperative for applying a relevant learning theory to the design and assessment of such activities.

To address this imperative and ensure maximizing learner engagement through social media tools, we must better situate this type of activity within an appropriate learning theory that enables educators to integrate uses of instructional technology with their pedagogical beliefs. Therefore, this chapter provides an overview for a sociocultural approach to designing meaningful and authentic learning activities to foster learner engagement in university-level courses through the use of social media tools. Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory (SCT) is an appropriate choice for the instructional design of social media-based activities, because it conceptualizes learning as a social process and highlights the impact that social factors and mediational tools have on learners’ development of higher order thinking skills (1978). The overview provided here includes a framework for designing activities, based on key SCT concepts such as development through social interactions, the role of mediational tools, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and scaffolding. The chapter concludes with a discussion of suggestions for future research.

WHAT IS LEARNER ENGAGEMENT?

In general terms, learner engagement can be defined as the “time, energy, and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance learning at university” (Krause, 2005, p. 3). More specifically, learner engagement may be best understood as a relationship between the student and the learning environment. In addition to many social and emotional benefits, trends in research from higher education have shown that students who are more actively engaged in the learning process experience higher levels of achievement (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010; Wang, 2017). As a result, many educators have attempted to increase learner engagement by employing group activities (Barber, King, & Buchanan, 2015; Chen & Chiu, 2016), game-based learning (Abdul Jabbar & Felicia, 2015; Hamari, Shernoff, Rowe, Coller, Asbell-Clarke, & Edwards, 2016), and various other strategies.