Chapter 1
The Impact of Quality E–Feedback as an Element of Social Learning Theory Applied in the Context of E–Learning Communities of Practice

Evelyn Gullett
Universitas 21 Global, Germany

ABSTRACT
This chapter discusses the preliminary study of meaningful quality e-feedback as an element of social learning theory applied in the online learning environment, or a Web-based community of practice. This qualitative study compared the depth of e-feedback given by online facilitators on case study and discussion board assignments, how that feedback contributed to the learner’s social learning, development and growth, and how quality e-feedback influences the virtual social learning environment. This study identified seven criteria of feedback depth tied to social learning that serve online university communities of practice as a tool towards a base standard of e-feedback that encourages social learning and development of each learner.

INTRODUCTION
Overall, it has been observed that higher educational organizations are “becoming increasingly business-like” (Holmes, George, McElwee, Gerard, 1995). With the continuous powerful growth of online university and corporate programs reaching global customers, it is just as crucial for those e-learning establishments to include not only service quality assessments for which they are held accountable (Kerlin, 2000), but to also include continuous good practices or quality and improvement mechanisms to help e-facilitators to maintain the highest quality standard consistently when lecturing, teaching, guiding, administering and supporting the online learner. Giving meaningful and quality e-feedback as an element of social learning to the student in online communities of practice is an essential part of this endeavor.
This chapter discusses the preliminary study of meaningful quality e-feedback as an element of Social Learning Theory applied in the environment of online communities of practice. Specifically, the study will compare and contrast the depth of feedback given by various professors for online assignments such as Discussion Board postings and Case Studies, for example, and how they contributed to the students’ social learning experience. Moreover, this study will undertake the effort to understand feedback and its importance as a social learning theory in e-learning, and how it may influence virtual communication and the overall learning environment of this online community of practice, or online classroom and its members.

This study will assume to identify criteria of feedback depth tied to social learning that will serve online Communities of Practice (such as online universities and corporate training programs) as a tool to achieve a base standard for consistent quality behavior. This is not only crucial for accreditation purposes for universities offering online learning programs, but also to remain a high rigor of quality management and assessment of their online educational programs; thus, making them more competitive. Encouraging consistent quality feedback as a social learning theory element to be applied as part of an activity among scholars and practitioners in the e-learning Community of Practice will enhance the overall learning outcome of the student and add to the rigor and quality of the educational program as a whole.

BACKGROUND

Social Learning Theory

As researched by Albert Bandura, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, teaching and learning are highly social activities and are key elements in the process of learning and development (Kim, Y., & Baylor, A., 2006). Bandura’s social learning theory focuses on the individual’s observation and modeled behavior, attitudes and emotional reactions (1977). An individual is most likely to adopt the modeled behavior if the following criteria are met. He or she finds the outcomes of the modeled behavior meaningful, the person observed is similar to him or her, the model is admired, and the behavior is perceived to be of functional significance. “Social learning theory explains human behavior in terms of continuous reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioral, an environmental influences” (Bandura, n.d.).

Similarly, Vygotsky also highlights the significance of social learning. His social development theory discusses the fundamental influence social interaction has on the cognitive development of the human being. Vygotsky (1978) states that “every function in the child’s cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (interpsychological) and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals.” (p. 57).

An additional feature of Vygotsky’s theoretical framework is his suggestion of the “zone of proximal development”. Once children interact socially, they will reach a certain level of development that will influence their cognitive development. Full maturation is thus dependent upon social interaction. An individual’s potential level of development can be continuously developed “through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (Vygotsky, p. 86, 1978). In other words, students are able to achieve more with the help and feedback of e-facilitators than on their own.

The social learning theory embraces various theories of learning to include cognitive, humanistic and behaviorist. In the 19th century, behavior was included in the study of the mind and how