

Social Learning and Learning Communities

Purpose

This research brief outlines common terms, constructs, benefits, and challenges surrounding the broad concepts of social learning and learning communities. It is intended to help provide a shared vocabulary to make further discussions of these important approaches more productive, and highlight areas of opportunity and further research.

What is Social Learning?

At its heart, social learning is a form of active learning where students learn from each other as well as from faculty. Social learning is a broad term and can refer to several categories, theories, or approaches to learning.

Constructs and theories

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) refers to a type of learning outcome, i.e., the learning of skills such as teamwork or emotional regulation. Research has identified a set of social and emotional competencies that, when developed during childhood, are linked to improved learning and success: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (Zins, Bloodworth, Weissberg and Walberg, 2004; Vega, 2012).

Social Learning Theory is Albert Bandura's theoretical framework for learning and motivation (also referred to as Social Cognitive Theory). This theory remains influential for its recognition of the dynamic, ongoing interaction between the self, the environment, and behavior. It recognizes in part that learning is highly influenced by one's interaction with others, including learning from watching others, being persuaded or encouraged by others, evaluating experiences, etc.

Social Constructivism is a variation on cognitive constructivism, with Lev Vygotsky its most influential advocate. While recognizing the importance of the individual's perceptions and need to make meaning of events and construct knowledge, social constructivism emphasizes the role of language and culture in these perceptions, and the collaborative nature of learning itself. Vygotsky (1978) articulated the idea of "the zone of proximal development... the level of development that the learner is capable of reaching under the guidance of teachers or in collaboration with peers..."

Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) views knowledge not as abstract information but as social practice specific to culture and context (learning as doing). This theory helps explain how practices are handed down from one generation to another, or how learning occurs within apprenticeships. Learning occurs through gradually increasing the levels of responsibility for the learner in authentic activities of the practice. Learning in situated contexts is by definition social and collaborative.

Social learning approaches within courses

The last several decades have seen a focus on a variety of overlapping but related learning approaches. These approaches are aimed primarily at achieving a course's explicit learning objectives, although they may have the effect or secondary purpose of developing social and emotional skills as well. Generally, these approaches are used to promote active learning, generate opportunities for authentic assessment, leverage the sharing of prior knowledge of groups of students, motivate students through group accountability, and/or emphasize a cooperative approach to learning over an individualistic or competitive approach. These include:

- **Problem-based learning:** this is a complex approach to learning that involves students' defining the problem for themselves and then going about solving it, generally in teams. Because of its heavy focus on learner autonomy and responsibility, as well as high-order thinking skills, problem-based learning requires a heavy investment in training for faculty and instructional designers to be developed and executed properly, and is not recommended until students have sufficient knowledge in the domain to enable complex decision-making (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006).
- **Project-based learning:** this is a broad term referring to learning activities where students work on defined projects, generally but not always in teams. It differs significantly from problem-based learning in that the students don't necessarily define the problem – a project is more typically defined for them or selected by the student under strict guidance from the teacher. Project-based learning activities range in complexity from simple to complicated.
- **Peer learning, collaborative learning, and cooperative learning** all refer to general approaches involving students working together with other students as a learning activity. The activities may be highly structured or informal. Some highly structured types of activities have been developed and researched to help foster collaborative learning, such as the jigsaw (for more information, see <https://www.jigsaw.org/>).

More specific social learning techniques that go beyond the style of instruction include:

- **Peer tutoring** – advanced students tutor less experienced or struggling students
- **Peer mentoring** – advanced students provide guidance and support that may go beyond the purely academic
- **Peer assessment** – students assess other students' work, whether counting towards a grade or just as a means of scaling individual feedback
- **Moderated discussion** – students engage in dialogue and analytical discourse with each other under the guidance of faculty; faculty-moderated online threaded discussions are one form of such discussion

- **Study groups** – collections of students – often self-formed –work together outside of class to achieve academic goals
- **Social media** – many faculty have pursued ways of having students use Facebook, Twitter, blogs, wikis, etc., as a means of fostering collaboration and communication

There are research bases for each of the above approaches, as well as for additional ones, such as experiential learning. All can improve outcomes, but none of the approaches are without challenges and should be executed purposefully and mindfully. Some students may resist, and even resent, relying on peers. It is especially important that students be given clear roles and expectations, an understanding of how they will be assessed, and that teachers clearly explain the purpose of group work. (Hillyard, Gillespie and Littig, 2010).

Social learning as described above pertains primarily to activities related to achieving the learning goals of a course. However, social learning can be considered more broadly to involve the social relationships and *the sense of community* that is created between a student and other students, faculty, others who support student success, and the institution as a whole.

What is a learning community?

There is no widely recognized definition of a learning community, but we refer to it here as a *group of students who form an identity as a group to work together to achieve overall academic success*. These groups typically extend beyond the classroom to include the broader community of the institution – all support personnel as well as faculty. Research suggests that classroom learning should not be isolated from the learning community for it to be effective. The social learning approaches above become an important part of executing an effective learning community strategy to improve student retention.

The most common type of learning community may be a structured cohort of students who progress through a set of linked courses, thus forming relationships that grow from one class to another. Many universities have created “first-year experiences” to help students form strong learning communities. Other learning communities may involve affinity groups, students with a shared interest in a particular subject or activity. Learning communities may also be residential, involving students and even faculty living together as well as being engaged in classes together. Learning communities can involve some combination of all these (see this video about learning communities at Purdue University: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cf9KqeyS_-Y).

Vincent Tinto has been the leading proponent and researcher of learning communities as an approach to helping students succeed academically. Engstrom and Tinto (2008) reviewed a variety of learning community efforts and found that overall they did significantly increase student retention for low-income community college students, even when taking into account demographic factors. In order to be successful, however, they identified the following as essential for faculty to help create a community of learners.

Learning community success factors

1. Creating a safe and inclusive learning environment
2. Using active and collaborative pedagogies that engaged students with their peers
3. Collaborating with other learning community faculty to develop an integrated, coherent curriculum
4. Integrating campus support services and programs into the learning community experience
5. Developing personal connections and relationships with students in which they encouraged students to meet high expectations while offering them high levels of support.

It is important to note that the reasons why learning communities work is not necessarily well understood. While one may assume it is because they increase student engagement in learning itself, it does not seem to be the case in Engstrom and Tinto's study. It is more likely due to the general support provided by the community, the shared purpose, and the increased self-efficacy students feel by seeing those similar to them struggle and succeed. *Tinto (2012) considers the combination of high expectations with high levels of support to be among the most important factors in academic success for at-risk students.*

Communities of Inquiry

While we refer to learning communities as going beyond classes, a class itself can be a simple form of a learning community. The Community of Inquiry framework (CoI) is a well-established model for considering community-building as an essential component of an educational experience, and this framework has been applied extensively to online education. Significant information on this framework can be found at <https://coi.athabasca.ca/coi-model/>. Based on a social constructivist perspective, it explains the educational experience in terms of the interactions of three types of "presence:"

- **Cognitive presence** – the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse
- **Social presence** – the ability of participants to identify with the group or course of study, communicate purposefully, and develop personal and affective relationships
- **Teaching Presence** – the design, facilitation and direction of collaborative inquiry for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes

In distance education, fostering community and collaboration becomes more challenging. It is impossible to overestimate the extent to which physical presence can improve communication, since social cues and body language can communicate more than words alone. Levels of attention can be fundamentally different between those who are present and those who are at a physical remove, particularly in asynchronous environments. However, *research is showing repeatedly that distant "presence" can be improved (if not matched to live presence) with*

relatively simple methods such as the use of pictures of the online participants, audio and video messaging instead of simply text, and the purposeful sharing of attitudes, beliefs, and personal interests.

In one study with over 28,000 participants, *researchers found a very high correlation between degree of social presence and re-enrollment in the next semester.* In fact, social presence correlated more highly than either cognitive or teaching presence. “Responses to Col item # 16 (*Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction.*) account for over 18% of the variance associated with whether a student returned to studies in the semester subsequent to completing the survey. This is, simply stated, a remarkable finding, especially in light of the sample size obtained” (Boston et al., 2008, p. 13).

How can technology help?

Students have access to a wide array of learning support resources and communities. Social learning solutions and platforms take students beyond typical social technologies (Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn, for example). New technologies are creating defined learning spaces to support relevant learning communities and strategic interactions.

The appendix lists sample technologies that enable social learning to:

- Enhance teaching presence through video, synchronous, or asynchronous connectivity capabilities;
- Enhance social presence through collaboration, observation, and interaction at a peer-to-peer level;
- Enhance cognitive presence with new types of learning activities that also enhance collaborative learning experiences for online students;
- Connect experienced students with new students;
- Help build a sense of community and relationships between the student, instructor, learning coach, and institution.

Conclusion

Learning is not simply the transmission of facts. Deep and profound learning occurs over time, through the acquisition, assessment, validation, synthesis and demonstration of knowledge attained. Social interaction is an essential component of learning and is important both for cognitive and non-cognitive reasons. An institutional focus on finding and sustaining innovative ways to enhance collaborative learning approaches and to build a sense of being part of a learning community will have significant benefits to our students' experience.

References

- Boston, W., Diaz, S.R., Gibson, A.M., Ice, P., Richardson, J., & Swan, K. (2008). An exploration of the relationship between indicators of the community of inquiry framework and retention in online programs. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 14 (1).
- Engstrom, C. M., Tinto, V. (2008). Learning better together: The impact of learning communities on the persistence of low-income students. *Opportunity MATTERS* (1), 5-21.
- Hillyard C., Gillespie, D. and Littig, P. (2010). University students' attitudes about learning in small groups after frequent participation. *Active Learning in Higher Education* 11(1): 9–20.
- Kirschner, P. A., Sweller, J., & Clark, R. E. (2006). Why minimal guidance during instruction does not work: An analysis of the failure of constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching. *Educational Psychologist*, 41(2), 75–86.
- Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning theory: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Tinto, V. (2012). *Completing college*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Vega, V. (November 7, 2012). Social and Emotional Learning Research Review: Avoiding Pitfalls Retrieved from <http://www.edutopia.org/sel-research-avoiding-pitfalls>.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zins, J.E., Bloodworth, M.R., Weissberg, R.P., and Walberg, H.J. (2004). The scientific base linking social and emotional learning to school success. In Zins, J.E., *Building academic success on social and emotional learning: What does the research say?* (pp. 3-22) New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Appendix

Enhancing teaching presence through video solutions (examples)

DeVry University's Connected Classroom – a closed interconnected communications solution connecting campus location-based classrooms with live audio/video, lecture capture, collaborative whiteboards, and classroom interaction

Kaltura – www.kaltura.com – offering video for educators who seek to easily create, upload, clip, manage, publish, and deliver video on any device, live or on-demand, through a universal video portal, or university-wide 'tube' library

BlueJeans – www.bluejeans.com – an interactive video collaboration technology for custom meetings and connecting dispersed group or teams for collaborative interaction

Becker Interactive eBook (IEB) - delivers an immersive, engaging interactive learning experience by enhancing flat lecture content in eCollege with multimedia and interactive elements

Enhancing social presence through connectivity and purposeful interaction

YouSeeU - www.youseeu.com – an asynchronous video presentation and discussion platform for student video-based assignments

Fletch - www.fletchapp.com/ - a web and mobile app technology designed to help students form study and community groups by course, college, or institutional affiliation

StudyCloud – www.mystudycloud.com – a course learning hub that connects the learning community by managing course materials, managing discussions, syncing calendars, and delivering notifications relating to assignments, quizzes and due date reminders

Notebowl – www.notebowl.com – a learning experience platform that integrates on-demand video conferencing with calendaring, bulletin board discussions, communities, and course management leveraging the Google platform for education

Interactive/Engaging learning technologies – newer types of learning technologies that can enhance collaborative learning for online students through games, game-based platforms, online simulations, collaborative annotation tools, etc.

Classroom Salon – www.classroomsalon.com – Making course documents and videos socially more engaging by-using video 'hot-spots', annotation, and peer-sharing through a social media-like interface

MLevel – www.mlevel.com – a casual game-based learning platform that reinforces learning through performance measurement, feedback, and competitive analytics

BrainRush – www.brainrush.com – a short-form game-based learning platform that uses adaptive learning strategies to achieve mastery of subject matter.

MuzzyLane/Knewton – Muzzy Lane, a game-based learning company and Knewton (www.knewton.com), an adaptive learning platform company, teamed up to develop game-based assessments using adaptive games (www.muzzylane.com / www.knewton.com)

Enhancing interaction (peer-to-peer and peer-to-mentor)

GetSet www.getset.com – a growth-mindset technology solution that helps students chart their progress and puts them in contact with fellow students who have faced and overcome similar challenges

Fidelis – www.fidelis.com – a Learning Relationship Management tool that enables students to build and maintain connections with other students and members of the larger university community