

A Kaleidoscope of Learning: Improving Student Engagement through Social Innovation

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Abstract

The nature and face of the educational landscape continues to change, and one of the ongoing challenges remains—how to best integrate social technologies as a tool for engaging learners in meaningful ways. Additionally, with a growing population of Generation X and Y students, the traditional forms of learning in the classroom have taken a backseat to the more engaging means of online, community, and “social learning.”

This chapter will discuss the emergence of social learning and will provide a list of innovative tools that can be used to improve student engagement, enhance instructional strategies, and encourage new learning heading into the future.

Technology Provides a View into the Future

Remember when it was once noted, “Isn’t that new LMS great?” Or when the realization of online learning became a reality? Well, that future is now here, and key benefits abound. The ability to reach a global audience and to engage in using technology provides more avenues to success than ever before.

Many of the resources provided from schools now include technical choices that can be quite influential with instruction, but they can also be a hindrance if faculty and instructors are not well versed in how to use them. For example, faculty members at City University of Seattle work to provide learning success early on through the use of a progressive learning model, templated course shells, and a personal online learning environment where faculty can experiment with new learning strategies and have them critiqued by a faculty community. Furthermore, at a university where learning innovation is encouraged, faculty can have a dramatic impact on student engagement using many of these online learning tools, approaches, and strategies.

As faculty start using these dynamic learning tools, what does the future of learning look like? What key actions can faculty focus on to push the borders of what is possible to even greater heights? Social learning can help set the stage in learning environments to ensure the technical use of instruction is making a strong impact.

Why Have Social Technologies Become the New Wave of Learning?

There have been several evolutions that have happened in learning over the course of the past few decades. In Bersin’s (2009) work, he showed an evolution of learning dating back to the 1980s and 1990s where society saw the rise of computer based training—one of the first forms of technology

integration using formal instruction. At the turn of the century, the e-learning era emerged with the rise of blended and informal learning making great advancements in academic and business realms (Bersin, 2009).

With so many technical advancements it has become harder than ever to determine a good prescription for knowing, “When is the right time to introduce new technologies?” In the classroom, instructors are focusing on improving ways to engage students in meaningful ways while encouraging the use of those new technologies—especially in a work world that is now demanding those components within an employee’s learning plan. To take advantage of key technologies, Muthler (2015) prepared a list of simple social tools have had success for sharing and collaborating; classroom innovation; and organization and planning. Edudemic Staff (2015) shared examples of how to use social media as tools in the classroom. The following section will review some of these options.

Using Social Tools to Benefit Learning

Studies show that bringing social learning into the classroom can greatly improve academic achievement (Fewkes & McCabe, 2012). There is considerable evidence that shows that the learning continuum can greatly be enhanced using social learning when early, ongoing, and simple knowledge-sharing tools are established early in the course (Kabilan, Ahmad, & Abidin, 2010). Additionally, social learning allows for a greater depth of resources to be introduced into the course curriculum and for use with online instruction. Social learning also brings strong consideration for the workplace as it follows a global trend that uses social learning as a key component in helping to encourage knowledge and information sharing across organizations (Meister & Willyerd, 2010).

The following is a list of some social tools used within online learning environments or integrated into formal instruction:

- Integrated use of videos—use of videos during instruction or as an alternative to written and/or visual diagrams’
- SlideShare and other document sharing tools—use of templates and previous models of learning to create an improved framework of understanding for the learner and increased collaboration within a team or to share publically,

- Group collaboration on Skype and Google Hangouts—group sharing and activities are greatly improved through simple collaboration tools, and
- Community learning integration setting up a community to establish ongoing learning throughout a learning path or during the exploration of various business or learning processes.

These innovative social tools and the technologies that make up a new dynamic form of learning will be explored further in the following section along with considerations for the right time to introduce and implement them.

What Makes Social Learning Work?

Social learning works for many different types of students in the classroom. “Social media can bridge the diversity that exists in classrooms by establishing a neutral zone in which students can interact with one another” (Junco et al., 2011). One method that has worked for students is the inclusion of video into formal instruction. The use of video can be integrated into course resources as they are now used on learning management systems like BlackBoard or provided as an additional resource to post within Discussion Boards. Regardless of the use, the ability to demonstrate concepts, share animated demonstrations, or to inspire a class has been greatly enhanced through the creation of “playlists” that demonstrate learning through the eyes of the student.

Additionally, the use of SlideShare and other document-sharing tools have increased presentation sharing in their ease of use, their capacity to share knowledge across the web, and their ability to remove security barriers that might arise due to conflicting technologies. The ability of students to share resources has hit an all-time high, evident in a recent Social Network Analysis Report which noted the increase of users (60 million) are concentrated to college-level students (Chappel, 2012).

Having teams online, more students are doing “meetups” by way of Skype or Google Hangouts. There are other tools available to accomplish this task, but due to the low cost (free) for the basic use of these products, it makes for faster adoption along with its integrated use in other social platforms (Skype with Facebook, and Hangouts with Google +).

Finally, though students are asked to use technology to retrieve and look for additional references, and to create project based work, perhaps the most overlooked aspect of social learning is the use of community groups. Some of the most popular ones can be found within social platforms, such as *LinkedIn Groups* or *Yammer Groups*, and can serve to gain critical “insider knowledge” through experienced professionals already in the field. Students who are actively involved in community groups have a far greater grasp of the professional knowledge needed to be successful in the field and continue to practice collaboration even in their own learning process (Hurt et al., 2012).

Challenges with Social Learning Use

Instructors would benefit from becoming familiar with social tools available. One of the reasons social learning integration can fail is that the instructor does not provide the right resources or encouragement necessary to support student usage and learning (Väljataga & Fiedler, 2009). Simply exploring these tools during a course will not likely help students; rather, instructors should be well-versed in how and when to best use these tools. Other studies have shown that social media can provide too much stimulation and therefore can distract students from completing their coursework (Hurt et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important to model the use of these tools during instruction and provide adequate class time for students to explore and better understand the advantage of using these tools.

Conclusion

There are many technology tools that can be used to enhance the learning experience, but few have shown the level of impact as the use of social learning tools, many of which are described in this chapter. In online instruction and formal coursework, it helps when groups are moving and learning together through processes, and the use of these tools helps to integrate improved instructional experiences and provide new approaches that are emerging through all communities across the globe.

In essence, social learning moves instruction into the new classroom of the future—"The Learning Cloud." On that journey, using these basic social tools will help students to be more engaged in the course, add greater relevance to instruction, and better prepare students for the new learning environments of the future.

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