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Social Software in the Classroom: The Case of Wikis for Scaffolding

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Abstract

The concept of being online, today, connotes a social experience and social activity is increasingly mediated by (new) technologies and the Internet (Laffey & Amelung, 2010). As we integrate more tools and resources to scaffold students, we need to understand what works and what does not work in a classroom in the future. The simple flexible nature of wikis makes them a powerful tool for collaborative and cooperative work. As they are free online writing spaces where context can be created, edited, viewed, revised, tagged, publicized, assessed and commented upon, wikis may be used as a source of scaffolding.

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1. Introduction

Being always on the move, human beings are experiencing and creating new facilities and ways of life. A new way of life has emerged for the 21st century human by the creation of new technologies. According to Shirkey (2008), new web technologies are creating a “tectonic shift” in the world because of what they allow us to do after we publish. “We create the potential for connections” (Richardson, 2010, p. 3) to form groups to make changes in the

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ways we learn. And the society, at large, will be affected using these new things which change the way groups of people and communities get things done. The change including the technological ones “will transform the world everywhere groups of people come together” (Shirkey, 2008, p. 3).

Because of innovations in technology throughout the past thirty years, the face-to-face interaction, collaboration and cooperation now have the opportunity to be boosted by tools gifted by technology. Having different aims, virtual communities have been formed through various technologies. Virtual communication patterns are harnessing more user-friendly tools such as discussion lists, forums, chat room, and more recently, blogs and wikis. Supporting traditional instruction, blended learning and e-learning appear to be three common approaches to use technology (Kalelioglu & Gulbahar, 2010). Horton (2000) argues that blended learning has shown to be the most successful of all because of the advantages it has over traditional and e-learning practices. Prominent among them is that blended learning benefits from the strengths of classroom as well as the web together. The result is that the students (and the teacher) communicate both face-to-face (in the classroom) and online (in the virtual environment).

To see how successful the emerging technology tools have been, research projects on the preferences and opinions of both students and teachers concerning the social software, the nature and level of interaction, and the analysis of what the people involved communicated through the tools have been conducted. Depending on how the researcher has looked at the usage and integration of the new tools in the educational environment and also owing to the affordances of these same tools, a number of theoretical frameworks including social learning, collaborative learning, individual differences, cooperation and constructivism have been used by many various studies.

As online environments, including wikis, are considered to be social platforms, their influence (and role) in learning seem to be significant. Thus, the present endeavour aims to discuss the development and changing activities and other tasks of social software according to Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist perspective.

2. Social Constructivist Theory

Unlike cognitivist theories of SLA, which view learning as predominantly psychological in nature, Vygotsky, moving a step forward, considers learning to be both social and psychological. As Daniel, Cole and Wertsch (2007) put it, Vygotsky's nondeterministic, non-reductionist view of the formation of mind provides the current theoretical frameworks of the ways in which human shapes and is shaped by the social, cultural, and historical conditions.

Vygotsky (1978) argues that the process of internalization directs the learners to move from the inter-psychological level (social plane), i.e. between individuals, to intra-psychological level (cognitive plane), i.e. within individual whereby they assume responsibility for their own learning. Anton (1999) states that technical and psychological tools and signs (such as language) mediate actions. And the mastery of psychological tools mediates the development of basic mental functions to higher mental functions such as voluntary attention and logical memory. For this transfer to happen, Vygotsky proposes the notion of Zones of Proximal Development (ZPDs), zones between what is called “actual” development (what the learner can do independently) and “potential” development (what the learner can do in the future, with the help of others). Every act of learning occurs within a ZPD, building on what the learner already knows and can do, and is first inter-psychological (social) before it is intra-psychological (psychosocial). Learning begins by being object-regulated, and then is others-regulated, before it is self-regulated.

The concrete manifestations of culture in the environment through objects and artefacts, rituals, routines and daily practices, documents and valued texts and so on function as sign systems that mediate learning. This is what Vygotsky refers to as object-regulation. He argued that the learner's starting point is social, at first, because s/he begins by taking cues from the environment. He, then, points out that one's potential development cannot be manifested if learning stops at object-regulation. So, the significant others come into play and play a key role in mediating learning in what Vygotsky calls others-regulation. The significant others can be parents, teachers, elders as well as (more expert) peers. To translate the potential development into actual development, self-regulation, the third stage, is vital. This is the stage the learners perform independently. Storch (2002) stated that Vygotsky's theory is applicable to all types of learning regardless of the learners' age (being a child or an adult), the context (formal or

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