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Personal Learning Theory – A View of Three

**Personal Learning Theory - Online Learning**

There continues to be an ongoing debate as to the type of technology or the design of the instruction that makes the most difference in learning. This debate goes even deeper now that there seems to be an onslaught of the number of ways that one is able to connect online for both professional and personal growth. Whether blended, fixed or fully online, several trends noted in online learning have emerged. Online learning allows for flexibility, access and allows a learner to minimize the time and space continuum (Cole, 2000) as well as a breaking down of the traditional physicality of four walls or boundaries (Liang & Chen, 2012). The types of technology including the devices allow for a faster way to connect, but does not always infer a better way to foster elaborate conversations (Liang & Chen, 2012) or whether or not the types of activities actually make a difference in competency of the course work.

To explore these ideas related to online learning through my personal learning theory (PLT) is to understand the inter-relatedness between the facilitation theory, experiential learning theory and social cognitive theory. The relationship of the types of learning activities developed by the instructor and the specific pedagogy used to deliver the content as it relates to online learning. My theory represents the role of the instructor as a facilitator (facilitator theory), the reinforcement activity and meaningful interactions between students and the activities (experiential learning theory) and the shared learning aside from the tools of observable behaviors in the process of the learning (social cognitive theory) (Schmid, Bernarda, Borokhovski, Tamimb, Abrami, Surkes, Wadea, Woods, 2013). To support my theory, a quick review of Richard Clark’s (1983 p.446) claim about the relationship between technology and pedagogy reminds us that the vehicles (technology) that best supports the curriculum is delivers the information and “only the content of the vehicle can influence achievement”. Although this claim was made quite some time ago when the technology was not as sophisticated and portable, much of it still true today. Schmid, et al., (2014) support this claim and through a meta-analysis of current research that technology does play a role in students’ acquiring content knowledge, but the overall message is that learning is through dynamic and meaningful activities and the tools provide the cognitive support as indicated through the Clark claim. By analyzing current research within this idea related to online learning, the emerging idea is that we are still a ways away from totally understanding what the cognitive tools look like, when they should be used and the instructional and integration strategies (pedagogy) that best support the tools (Schmid, 2014). Bridging this information, the pedagogy of online learning can be noted as moving away from knowledge acquisition to a model of participation and knowledge creation (Green, Edwards, Wolodko, Stewart, Brooks, & Littledyke, 2010).

With any type of instruction, including online, the materials, opportunities for interaction, delivery and effective use of technology must be designed properly to engage the learner and promote learning. Critical thinking skills continue to emerge as a theme when determining whom the online learner is and how to best approach the learning when the learners are not in the same room or even engaging synchronously. Employing a variety of strategies, considerations of the cognitive processes including problem solving, reflection and creating thinking show that these are important to the student learning (Şendağ & Odabaşı, 2009). Further to this, development of learning communities early in online education helps to bridge distances and differences between physical and virtual worlds of teaching and learning (Baghdadi, 2011) and student to student and student to instructor interactions.

To further understand how these three theories support my PLT, a review of each theory includes specific examples of the theory and the relationship to online learning. Today’s learners are different, the time and place continuum is being stretched and through a review of research articles, the plethora of materials and the discussions that concur that this is a time of challenge. The challenge is not only to support the learner but also the instructor who might be in a state of flux of how to best represent content that was never intended to be distributed through anything but a face-to-face model. The combination of properties in online learning indicates a new learning domain and educational environment that instructors provide a conceptual framework to guide design and implementation of online courses (Harasim, 2000).

**Facilitation Learning Theory**

Literature shows that online learning courses work best in a constructivist environment (Relan & Gillani, 1997). A facilitator of online learning, whether a constructivist or instructivist, Clark (1983, p. 445) acknowledged,

“The best current evidence is that media are mere vehicles that deliver instruction but do not inﬂuence student achievement any more than the truck that delivers our groceries causes changes in our nutrition. Basically, the choice of vehicle might inﬂuence the cost or extent of distributing instruction, but only the content of the vehicle can inﬂuence achievement).

Related to constructivism, there seems to be a consensus from a pedagogical standpoint which indicates that online learning should promote collaborative learning, authentic and reflective activities within learning communities, indicative of Vygotsky (Allen, 2005). However, as Liang and Chen (2012) note, as much as constructivism is relevant to online learning, we continue to focus on the benefits of the paradigms rather than exploring the limitations. On a very concrete level when Carl Rogers, who has been recognized as one the theorist behind the facilitator theory, was questioned as to development of a paradigm in education, he noted:

“He asserts that persons have within themselves the capacity to
reorganize their lives in the direction of maturity and fulfillment, if the proper psychological climate is present. Concretely, this means that if the therapist communicates understanding, acceptance, and congruence to the client, the client can and will do the rest” (Aden, 1980 p. 556).

As one element of my PLT, this theory is rooted in application and happens when there is proficiency at a level that moves the learner from one place to the next. The content will drive the direction of the learning and provide the foundation with which a learner will build and grow their capacity on a topic. Although this happens at varying levels, as a learner applies prior and future knowledge, the information gained develops the context and supports the mastery of the learning. When does this mastery happen and learning occur? Throughout the entire learning cycle, a learner is building on prior knowledge and gaining and storing information as the instructor uses the technology to store the content and match to the learner. This storehouse of information can be accessed from a learner at point of need.

Lu (2004) note that many novice instructors struggle with the facilitator role and the adjustment necessary to become a skilled facilitator versus the content expert. Often times, the instructor hesitates to moderate discussions, stays silent and just observes the interactions of the students without providing any form of feedback or constructive discourse (Li-Fen & Jeng, 2007).

**Experiential Learning Theory**

"I hear and I forget. I see and I remember. I do and I understand"

~ Confucius (551 BC-479 BC)

Experiential learning theory has been defined as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" (KoIb, 1984, p.41).  Although there is much debate and objections about the idea of a learning styles and their validity and reliability as well as the meaning of the term learning style, when discussion about the application of the theory to pedagogy (Waters, 2012) within the scope and sequence of teaching and learning, my PLT asserts that one should not rely on one particular ‘style’ when meeting the needs of the online learner, but rather develop instructional strategies and opportunities as well as utilize the cognitive tools which match the current need and goals.

McCarthy (2010) explored Kolb’s theory and Learning Style inventory through a conceptual analysis of current literature. It was concluded and supported through a variety of reviews that research supports the degree of involvement of the learner, the reflective nature of the activity and the interactions between the instructor and the learner as dependent forces that encourage or discourage the motivation of the learner.



Figure 1. Conceptual Schematic of Kolb’s Learning Styles, Modes, and respective Learning Environments. Note for each Learning Style there is two corresponding Learning Modes and for each Learning Mode, there is a corresponding Learning Environment.

To understand Kolb’s Experiential Learning theory, a quick look at the learning cycle and specific attributes of the learner. Although not a debate about whether or not one agrees or disagrees with the idea of “styles” for a learner, this information will support the assimilation of the theory as it relates to an online learner for future discussion. Kolb indicated that the Experiential Learning Theory is based on two continuums that form the quadrant. The schematic broadens to include the learning styles.

Concrete Experiences - These individuals prefer to feel and experience rather than think. A learner who prefers this type of learning is one who desires the direct human interactions and Kolb describes them as intuitive decision makers, who value circumstances involving people in real world situations (Kolb, 1984). An artistic approach rather than scientific approach is often found in individuals who prefer this type of style.

Reflective Observation mode focuses on the ability to understand the meaning of

ideas. Individuals who are characterized by this mode value objective judgment,

impartiality, and patience. They prefer abstract understanding to practical applications,

and they prefer to reflect and observe rather than act on a situation.

Abstract Conceptualization – These individuals typically prefer tasks that involve logical investigation of ideas and concepts. Unlike concrete experiences, this learning mode is characterized by a preference to depend on cognitive rather than emotional skills. Commonly, individuals who prefer this mode tackle academic problems that require the ability to build general theories in order to come up with a solution. People in this mode also value rigorous idea analysis and well-defined conceptual systems. Finally, this mode involves the use of “systematic planning, manipulation of abstract symbols, and quantitative analysis” (Kolb, 1984, p. 69).

Active Experimentation. “The active experimentation learning mode focuses on actively influencing people and changing situations” (Kolb, 1984, p. 69). Being involved in the peer interactions and the decision making process of the interactions. In this mode, the learner is focused on the practicality or the solution to the problem rather than reflection. People who use this mode are pragmatists and focus on doing rather than observing.

Conducting an empirical research study based on the need to determine whether or not lecturers in higher education needed a stronger awareness of the experiential learning style, , Znidarsic and Dimovski (2011) concluded that if a instructor matches students' experiential learning-style factors: visual based learning experience, hearing based learning experience, and doing based learning experience, a student’s attitude towards online learning and academic excellence was achieved.

Specifically exploring experiential learning theory through the lens of online learning, one might identify with newer technologies, digital media simulations, which students are provided opportunities that are scalable, reusable and while providing an immersive environment, one which reflects closely how people interact in the real world (Llewellyn & Frame, 2013). The need for focused instruction on the process and less on the content, allows for the intrinsic motivation needed to develop competency based on experiences when faced with a task. Through a simulated environment, adult learners find an immediate value of the learning as well as clearly outlined objectives foster the need to why the learning is important and while creating student-centered learning opportunities (Llewellyn & Frame, 2013).

The quality of the experience is dependent upon the degree of involvement of the student, the relevance of the subject matter and whether the subject is task or patient based. The meaningfulness of the reflection is dependent upon the tools used to aid reflection, the ad hoc or planned nature of the activity and the behavior of the learner in the reflective process (Llewellyn & Frame, 2013). The interaction of the experience with reflection is dependent upon forces that will encourage interaction such as external intervention of a teacher, internal motivation of the learner or a random act from a third party. Barriers to the interaction of the experience and reflection may be competing priorities in the mind of the learner, lack of internal energy or active resistance.

**Social Cognitive Theory**

As an accepted learning strategy, critical thinking supports high level learning and is widely used and accepted in face-to-face interactions (Kanuka & Garrison, 2004). When exploring factors as to why the same level of students’ expectations related to critical thinking in online learning are not experienced, communication issues between instructors and students are among the most commonly noted (Kanuka & Garrison, 2004). Facilitating critical, complex and creative thinking as an emergent model, specifically related to Bandura’s (1989) social cognitive theory in online learning continues to be an essential question of how to best influence these conversations while engaging in effective discourse. “There is a growing body of evidence that human attainments and positive well-being require an optimistic sense of personal efficacy (Bandura, 1989, p. 1176). Self-efficacy has been noted as a determining factor as to the level of motivation and how much effort a person will exert in an endeavor and length of time they will continue when faced with obstacles (Bandura, 1989).

Another factor which instructors must contend with in online learning is developing a social presence. Learning takes place on a continuum and social presence has been defined as “people’s perceptions of a person’s being real or being there” (Cui, Lockee, & Meng, 2013 p. 663). Social presence is a critical component in understanding social context and creating a comfortable social climate, and also relates to the level to which people verbally and nonverbally project themselves through a medium (Garrison 1997). From an instructional design standpoint, social cognitive theory, specifically social presence has been determined to be a factor improving learners’ satisfaction and instruction while building a sense of community (Cui, Lokee & Meng, 2013). From a personal perspective, introductions, whether formal or informal set up the learner with a level of expectations as to the instructors social presence. There is an immediate connection point, a feeling of anticipation subsides and a general rapport of community is created. This also concurs with current research that finds a positive correlation between interactions with others related to a students’ social presence, the community connectedness because of this peer-to-peer interaction and the perceived learning outcomes (Cho, Shen & Laffey, 2010).

Another factor relating to experiential learning theory as it relates to online learning, is the idea of self-regulation, specifically interaction regulation. Cho and Shen (2013) describe this as the skills needed for students to interact with each other in an online learning environment. Considering there is a high degree of expected interaction in an online environment, this is an interesting topic to consider. This is not about the student and the regulatory skills that a student must maintain within an online learning environment, but rather what the interaction indicators of students (Fowler, 2008). Cho & Shen (2013) note that very little research is available about interaction regulation although a worthy topic of research.

**Impact on instructional design and online learning: My lens**

What is the intersection of good teaching practices and those looking for the right combination of participatory activities of these learning theories while understanding the needs of the students and the requirements of the institution? From an instructional design standpoint, one might need to step back and focus on the pedagogy, but also focus on when does learning occur best? When a learner is allowed to grow and expand their own belief system, is given a chance to understand varying points of view, while placing the knowledge into their storehouse, this is when learning is at its best. When feedback is provided, the learner is allowed to build their capacity and explore differing views whether there is agreement. This feedback is also instrumental in the process of learning. To be an effective learner, one must also be an effective listener. Listening to the spoken words, but also those that remain unspoken. A learner should be able to understand what is being said but also the ability to recall information and apply as necessary.

One might think that there should be no difference in the effectiveness of the learning whether presented face-to-face or online, but from my own experiences, there are multiple barriers that I have personally uncovered. These barriers have impeded my own recall, listening and development of contextual learning. With the intersection of these theories, a learner should feel confident enough to say what the mean and mean what they say and not have a feeling of uneasiness in disagreeing with a student. This social aspect supports the idea of mutual respect and building rapport with the other learners. There is a problem with this when one has no idea of who the student is or their background. How does one build rapport with the other students from a distance? Is relationship building left up to the instructor to set the tone and expectation?

Another barrier to successful online learning is personalization and a sense of community. The vehicle is only delivering the content. To create an effective course of delivery, the content is designed to have the ability to adapt and be personalized to the cultural backgrounds (Picciano, 2006), the various styles of the learning and the diverse needs of the students. The instructor considers course objectives, student needs and discipline. These varied barriers have often been associated with the types and styles of interactions and could be considered one of the most controversial issues associated with online learning environments (Picciano, 2006). Although criticized even when experienced online instructors utilize discussion boards, forums or discussion opportunities, there is still an indication of a high degree of interaction when utilized. Key to the success of these forms of messaging includes timely information exchanges and when interruptions hinder the interactions, routines are broken which disrupts the flow of the discussions (DeSanctis, Fayard, Roach, & Jiang, 2003).

Noted are these interruptions, but there is a continued forward movement of online learning as a viable solution to meeting the needs of not only the instructor but also student when exploring options of design (Picciano, 2006). The bottom line for any instructional system is to foster learning (Ally, 2004). If the instructional design principals of online learning are merely a regurgitation of information with no clarity as to the need or quality of the learning objects used to increase knowledge, does this equate to an efficient delivery system? Experiential learning provides the opportunity for the learner to engage in meaningful activities that support the content. Building a social presence takes more than just creating a board that a student can provide feedback. Building a community of learners who interact about topics, dig deeper than a mere yes or no answer and fully engage in topical discourse should be a goal of any good instructional designer. The instructor acts a facilitator of the learning, but if there is no substance or direction of the content, what is there to facilitate?

**Conclusion, Summary and future research**

Educational practice is shaped by the main ideas of learning (Tsai, 2009). Online learning is one of convenience and a collective process in knowledge construction and confirmation. Convenience allows a learner to participate when otherwise might not be possible due to time, travel or even cost. Do instructional designers give up something in exchange for convenience? As the evolution of online learning continues to be defined, the number of students will continue to increase. Instructors must consider the role of facilitator, the types of experiences that engage learners in socially effective ways and the variety of experiences, which allows and instructor to maintain a level of interaction while creating a socially acceptable environment and ensuring the quality of online learning for future students.

To further the discussion and add to current research, an exploration of these theories as related to online learning would be very beneficial. I would propose a study that explores the relationship of the development learning activities related to Kolb’s Experiential learning theory and the specific pedagogy used to deliver the content as it relates to online learning – specifically asking: Does the type and style of activities influence the participation of students in online learning? The focus on this research is not focused on the learner, but the types of activities. Rather than add another piece research to the already vast journal articles about learning styles, whether or not styles exist, who falls under what style, what to call them – styles or preferences, it seems to be more beneficial to improve the already existing models and refine the instruments. During my review of the literature, I found that researchers agree that online learning has added another element of understanding the research, but as Santo (2006), points out, learning styles become a complicated element with learning online. A mixed methods, triangulation design will not only provide quantitative data as to the types of activities support the research question. Sub-questions would include:

* What types of activities do you find most inclusive?
* Do you feel that participatory activities help support your learning or alienate you from the rest of the learners?
* Are you taught how to participate in an online learning?
* What types of activities have you participated in which involve you in the learning process?
* Are there types of activities, which you prefer?

Since online instructors usually do not engage with students in face-to-face interactions, they may be more concerned with the mechanics of course delivery than with the individual concerns of students (Richmond & Cummings, 2005). This research would fill a gap, which would investigate the learning versus the learner. There will always be limitations to learning online, but as we continue to unfold this exciting style of learning, the benefits will overcome. Instructors will become more proficient in understanding the types of activities, which promote their role as a facilitator versus the delivery and create activities, which allow for more interactions as their role taking a guide approach. They will engage students through activities, which allow students to experience and use their preferences of learning to enable a level of discourse that supports a variety of learning outcomes. Finally, a deeper understanding of breaking down the walls of the online classroom through creating a deeper sense of community, activities which promote a higher level of inquiry and peer to peer collaboration.

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