Chapter 43
An Activity Theoretical Approach to Examining Virtual Professional Development and Informal Learning via Social Networks

Joseph M. Terantino
Kennesaw State University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the adoption of activity theory (Engeström, 1987, 2001; Leont'ev, 1978, 1981) as a conceptual framework for analyzing learning processes related to professional development and informal learning via social network environments. The discussion includes an overview of professional development and informal learning via social networks, which highlights the need for a related analytical framework. Activity theory is then described and applied to an example of professional development. This operationalization of activity theory demonstrates the ability of the framework to enable viewing and analyzing learning via social networks such as Facebook communities, wiki and blog spaces, listservs, and discussion forums. The chapter ends with several key points related to implementing activity theory as a solution to investigating behaviors in social networks and potential directions for future research.

INTRODUCTION

In today's society, earning a certificate or degree that accompanies the completion of various formal education programs is a fundamental prerequisite

to being considered for many professional positions. For example, teaching certificates, nursing licenses, Ph.D.s, and similar products of formal education are often considered rites of passage. However, while completing these programs many pre-service professionals turn to the Web for additional professional development and informal

learning to supplement their in-class experiences. In addition, others who have already entered the workforce have expanded the more traditional and more formal methods of professional development via coursework and organized seminars and workshops to include social network environments. In many cases turning to online resources as a means to expanding professional development options has been a result of tough economic times (Gandel & Golden, 2004). Whether it be due to the changing needs of workplace professionals or financial concerns it has become increasingly more common for both pre-service and in-service professionals to pursue professional development and informal learning via social networking platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and other Web 2.0 tools such as field-specific blogs, discussion forums, listservs, and wikis.

This relatively new pattern in professional development, creating less formal, virtual communities of practice, has evolved primarily as a byproduct of the social nature of humans and the inherent interactive qualities and widespread use of social media and Web 2.0 tools. Combined, these related forces are steadily changing the manner in which individuals and groups gather, create, and exchange information worldwide for personal and professional purposes. With these rapid changes in mind, a new challenge has also arisen for those of us who are interested in analyzing and understanding these unique practices. How should we attempt to organize and analyze the behaviors related to professional development, which are now situated in a virtual environment? The following chapter aims to answer this question.

Building on this general introduction to professional development and informal learning via social networks, the purpose of this chapter is to present activity theory (Engeström, 1987, 2001; Leont'ev, 1978, 1981) as a viable conceptual framework for viewing, analyzing, and better understanding these processes. To accomplish this feat, the following section of this chapter presents a historical overview of social networks and their impact on society. This is followed by a discussion of professional development and informal learning via social networks, which highlights the need for a related analytical framework. Then, activity theory is explicated and operationalized with regards to professional development and informal learning. Last, the chapter ends by describing several key points related to implementing activity theory as a solution to investigating behaviors in social networks and potential directions for future research.

THE ROLE OF SOCIAL NETWORKS

The role of social networks in our society has evolved rapidly over the past several decades. This has been due in large part to the ever-increasing availability and capabilities of computer and internet-based technologies. Because the role of these technologies continues to evolve so rapidly, often researchers are unable to maintain up-to-date investigations. Thus, applying an appropriate theoretical framework to such innovative research, as presented by this chapter, is paramount. In addition to defining social networks and their role in our society, this section reviews social networks, professional development, and informal learning as a means to highlighting the need for implementing an analytical framework for future research related to social networking technologies.

An Overview of Social Networks

Social networks are online platforms, sites, services, and tools that individuals use to establish connections and relationships with other users. The modern version of social networks emerged in the 1990s when social networking sites began to further develop the ability to search for and connect with friends (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Often these "friends" are established based on offline relationships, familial ties, or similar interests. Currently, two of the most popular social networking platforms are Facebook and Twitter. Consider

13 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the publisher's webpage: www.igi-global.com/chapter/an-activity-theoretical-approach-to-examining-virtual-professional-development-and-informal-learning-via-social-networks/105277

Related Content

Overview of Learning From Past to Present and Self-Directed Learning
Cihad entürkand Gülçin Zeybek (2019). *Self-Directed Learning Strategies in Adult Educational Contexts (pp. 138-182).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/overview-of-learning-from-past-to-present-and-self-directed-learning/224470

Effects of Serious Games on Student Engagement, Motivation, Learning Strategies, Cognition, and Enjoyment
Zhonggen Yu, Paisan Sukjairungwattanaand Wei Xu (2022). *International Journal of Adult Education and Technology (pp. 1-15).*
www.irma-international.org/article/effects-of-serious-games-on-student-engagement-motivation-learning-strategies-cognition-and-enjoyment/314607

A Meta-Analysis of the Effect of Interactive Technologies on Language Education
Runtong He, Wei Xu, De Dongand Zhonggen Yu (2024). *International Journal of Adult Education and Technology (pp. 1-28).*
www.irma-international.org/article/a-meta-analysis-of-the-effect-of-interactive-technologies-on-language-education/340933

Implications for E-Learning in Adult Education Curriculum
R. Parkavi, P. Karthikeyanand Linda Ellington (2021). *Research Anthology on Adult Education and the Development of Lifelong Learners (pp. 1311-1329).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/implications-for-e-learning-in-adult-education-curriculum/279786

Students with Learning Disabilities' Perceptions of Self-Determining Factors Contributing to College Success
Theresa Marie Wegner (2017). *International Journal of Adult Vocational Education and Technology (pp. 1-13).*
www.irma-international.org/article/students-with-learning-disabilities-perceptions-of-self-determining-factors-contributing-to-college-success/185507