Chapter 2
Exploring Social Learning Constructs in Corporate Informal Web-based Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

As many organizations have taken an interest in social learning, they have been concerned with how to design effective social learning environments for their learners. Although there are studies regarding the importance of social learning, the use of social learning tools, and the implementation and challenges of social learning in the workplace, there is little research on what social learning constructs are crucial for designing social learning environments. This chapter aims to explore social learning constructs in corporate informal web-based learning environments. To achieve its purpose, this chapter initially identified major social learning constructs in informal web-based learning environments based on theoretical grounds and literature reviews. As a result, learning, community, interaction, and social media were identified as environmental constructs, and motivation and self-efficacy were identified as individual constructs.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional formal corporate trainings, which are mainly led by instructors or served as one-time training sessions, can no longer be expected to be useful for learners in the workplace. Instead, attention on informal learning has been increasing in corporate education (Bingham & Conner, 2010). According to Cross (2007), people in corporations learn informally most of what they need to know on the job. Merriam, Caffarella and Baumgartner (2007) also revealed that it has been estimated that over 70 percent of learning in the workplace is informal. The driving factors of this change can be summarized in three aspects. First, it is revealed that adult learners become more proactive learners when there are practical

needs or requirements and they can choose and construct independently their own learning experiences (Zemke & Zemke, 1984; Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005; Reynard, 2007). In other words, adult learners can organize their learning based on what would be useful and required of them, and discover meaningful knowledge in the process of learning activities from different knowledge sources. Second, it is found that adult learners learn not only by themselves as individuals, but also with others through collaborative interaction. In this context, connection, interaction, and dialogue are considered as crucial elements in adult learning (LeNoue, Hall & Eighmy, 2011). Third, most corporate education has started emphasizing not employees' mere acquisition of knowledge but employees' effective application of learning on the job through sharing authentic knowledge and experience with others. In this regard, corporations have made an effort to provide interactive and collaborative learning environments among learners, practitioners, and workers.

At the same time, social learning has gained high attention in the workplace as it particularly emphasizes social interaction with others for learning in informal environments. Social learning became acknowledged as the primary element for effective organizational performance as most work in organizations are not accomplished by the individual learning of one person but through the social learning of a group of people and networks (Wilkins, 2008; Jarche, 2010). Many companies, however, still maintain the traditional formal education format and have failed to provide effective social learning. This is because of the limitations with the current education format to facilitate learner's active participation and expand learner's motivation to share knowledge with other learners. The representative examples are e-learning programs and knowledge management systems. E-learning in the workplace has come into the spotlight for its cost-effectiveness compared to classroom learning. Knowledge management systems in the workplace have also been well established in that it has implemented and computerized a community of practices. Although both e-learning and knowledge management system may result in the successful outcome of cost reduction and technological accessibility, they have shown the limitations in facilitating social learning in two ways.

First, in the case of e-learning programs, although there are interaction means, such as discussion rooms, chatting spaces, and bulletin boards, they often result in individual learning, not social learning. In addition, among possible interactions between instructor-learner, learner-learner, and learner-content within e-learning programs (Moore, 1989), most interactions occur merely between instructors and learners through simple questions and answers. Although social learning can be mostly active when there are learning activities with peer groups with a two-way and continuous communication among learners, the current e-learning programs have not yet provided such environments. Second, in the case of the knowledge management system, it has a limitation of providing a meaningful social learning environment for real and practical knowledge sharing and creation. This is because it initially focused on the development of a database of information. Therefore, although many organizations have invested in implementing knowledge management systems to manage information resources and organizational knowledge, there are few opportunities for employees to acquire, share, and use authentic information and knowledge (Davenport, 1994; Bednar, 2000; Vanderville, 2000). To sum up, the conventional approach taken for developing e-learning programs and knowledge management systems has not sufficiently provided the environment for effective social learning (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Donahue, 2001; Gilmour, 2003; Stahl, Koschmann & Suthers, 2006; Bang & Dalsgaard, 2006). Because of such limitations of e-learning programs and knowledge management systems, social media has appeared as a strong alternative to support social learning in the workplace.

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