

Affordances of Social Media for Learning Beyond the Classroom of English as Second Language: An Integrative Review of the Literature

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Abstract: This study discusses the use of social media for informal learning of English as a Second Language (ESL). It provides a synthesis of the literature in the field and a series of illustrative examples of how these new technologies are being used in leisure learning. In recent years, social media is in such widespread use that it is time to assess its capabilities and affordances as an informal learning tool of ESL. Research indicates agreement that these tools challenges the ways learners understand their continuous learning practices and relationships, especially in communicating, sharing and collaborating. These technologies are social, open and easy to use, thus, they embrace the potentially active participation of all learners outside the classroom.

Key words: Media, classroom, beyond, field, series

INTRODUCTION

There is a little controversy that social media is perceived as universal learning tool. The impact on education is still debated. This study reports the findings of an empirical study that examined social media technologies play an important role in enabling specific opportunities for the learners to learn ESL outside of the classroom for lifelong. Hence, affordances refer to the positive benefits flowing from the choice of social media tools for achieving learning outside the classroom for ESL purposes. A probe into what users expect of the technology and how they manipulate the technology will reveal social and cultural assumptions which in turn shed light on the practice pattern of the social media usage.

In fact, many formal institutions emphasize that new academic models are required to meeting the requirements of millennial learners (Shihab, 2009). Today's learners require greater freedom and more engaging resources to learn in future (Gardner, 2011; Branch, 2012), thus, this calls for researchers to gain a deeper understanding of their potential for empowering choice, imagination and self-direction for learners. The following sections elaborate on positive possibilities of social media tools towards informal learning framework.

Content discovery: Social media tools offer flexible access to encourage communal authorship and intelligence through interactive search engines and the world's virtual library (Andersen, 2007). The sharing of multimedia files

also provides an alternative learning approach to traditional text-based learning resources which benefits learners who have an audio-oriented learning style and affords diversified curricular activities (Jonassen *et al.*, 2008). Similarly Mortimer (2010) suggests using social media tools in class offers learners an interactive learning environment in which highly visual and auditory learners can be successful. For example, the use of web tools offer rich opportunities to collect material from many sources that fit their specific needs (Dillard, 2011; Jonassen *et al.*, 2008; Lee *at al.*, 2008). Content publishing is instant, interactive and dynamic in social media environment, thus, individuals are able to create, share or contribute worldwide. For instance, publishing and authorship in social media involve manipulating a variety of words, sounds, videos and images to appropriate and reuse existing content (McLaughlin, 2010). As a result, more learners can create, gather organize and share content to meet their own needs and those of others towards the development of user-generated content and context (Boruta *et al.*, 2011; McLaughlin, 2010; Greenhow and Robelia, 2009). For that reason, social media tools provide contextually applicable means by enabling individuals to change and decide based on their needs, aims and environments, inspiring dynamic and multidirectional information flows.

Learning motivation: Social media technologies are highly recommended for encouraging learners to practice language in natural settings. Using social media tools as

English learning tools increases learning pleasure (Feng, 2009; Gee, 2009) and intrinsic motivation for learning English. Learners may be familiar with these tools outside the classroom and therefore, when they use it in class they will feel more driven (Mortimer, 2010; Warschauer, 2007). Further, motivation is attributed to learners finding social media tools fun and interactive (Gardner, 2011; Hernandez *et al.*, 2011; Mortimer, 2010), especially where there was immediate feedback while learning the English language. For instance, learner-users quickly discover for themselves that a vast of the information on the Internet is in English and they can use English as an approach of learning about and communicating online with people around the world. Besides, the motivating quality of the social media tools is when students recognise it as an interesting tool for their future careers (Eberhardt, 2007; Gardner, 2011). Boruta *et al.* (2011) also emphasis on recent research and development of an education tool based on social media technologies to support English as Second Language (ESL) learning. Social media tools allow for language learning as important social experiences because the tools are non-threatening, student-centred, support immediate feedback and are effective for both self and peer correction.

Communication: As one of the main aspects of lifelong learning, this affordance is evident in social media (Ebner *et al.*, 2010). As suggested by Lenhart and Madden (2007), these tools are useful for one-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-one and many-to-many modes of communication. Communications may be synchronous or asynchronous and may be private or public. Information can be presented in a range of formats (text, audio, visuals) and interactive contents (conversational artefacts). In such environments, users engage in current literacies for lifelong learning, communicative forms of behaviour and identity formation (Bragg, 2006; Ebner *et al.*, 2010; Greenhow and Robelia, 2009). Much lifelong learning that has always taken place now becomes more visible but also creates more spaces for this to occur and begins to blur the boundaries between students and others in informal learning, as disclosed by Armstrong and Franklin (2008). This affordance will allow learners working individually or collaboratively, developing critical and reflective skills, learning by doing and more positive experiences (Andersen, 2007; Oblinger and Oblinger, 2005).

REFLECTION AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Research on educational reflection is well established; however, studies on the potentials of

educational technology-based reflections have only just started. For example, podcast helps learners to contribute and share their skills and knowledge with broader audiences, because they can record their own podcast for note-taking, curriculum feedback and experience sharing for personal reflection (Jonassen *et al.*, 2008; Lee *et al.*, 2008). It has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words; visual communication provides unique opportunities to express ideas through images. People use attractive images to help them convey specific information or express personal stories (Jonassen *et al.*, 2008). Currently, more social media tools are being made available inside institutions, as part of the learning management system or as separate tools (Armstrong and Franklin, 2008). As such, the formal tasks support the learners by providing an autonomous online environment where they could share cultural products that expanded on class subjects and discussions.

Social media tools can become partners with learners, especially in developing higher order learning (Salomon and Perkins, 1996). Subsequently, identity exploration and formation are facilitated by the projection of an individual's identity, membership and feedback from others (Greenhow and Robelia, 2009; Mills, 2011). In this sense, learners enhanced and personalized their online profiles to explore their identities in a variety of ways. This is consistent with the findings from Pew internet and American Life Project survey; 66% of members in youth social networking activities reported limiting access to their profiles (Lenhart and Madden, 2007). For instance, users selectively reveal by filling out only certain information, such as their personal information and ignoring details. Learner-users also may have one profile to share with friends and another less detailed profile to interact with strangers.

Collaboration: Most of the literature on collective and collaborative learning assumes that social media technologies support learners in more inspiring collaborative online activities (Khatib, 2011; Dale, 2010; Tapscott, 2009). Collaborative affordance of social media allows for data distribution through a range of software applications where old-timers and beginners equally can make their work available to the rest of the world (Shihab, 2009). In this way, learner-users with similar interests also can learn from each other and actively contribute to the social media-based content and knowledge (Arbaugh and Benbunan, 2007; Ebner *et al.*, 2010; Lee *et al.*, 2008). Learners enjoy an interactive and collaborative setting when the social media tools allowed for better sharing of opinions and thoughts, higher feedback rates from classmates, more shared learning and

critical thinking skills (Cho *et al.*, 2009). These new contemporary learning tools help learners stay on track, enthused and systematized. So, the English learning became more stimulating and much easier than before and allowed them to go deeper, in studying the planned topics (Shihab, 2009). This affordance offered by social media communal activities in virtual settings, in turn will develop the learner-user's capacities to contribute and distribute knowledge in that activity.

SOCIAL PARTICIPATORY AND COMMUNITY-BUILDING

A concrete attempt to develop such a technology for community-building is the design of personal devices with built-in social functionality (Andersen, 2007; Cho *et al.*, 2009) in a networked learning community. This sociability does not even need to be an explicit goal for a user but is designed for just such an experience coming to a user's mind while using a tool. In this sense, opportunities for online participation mobilize young people to social action through the new learning tool. From another perspective, Lenhart and Madden (2007) found that young users profoundly use social media tools for personal expression and creative work. For example, Lenhart and Madden (2007) reported 55% of all online American teens use online social media tools. Older youths, mostly girls (aged 15-17), are more likely to participate in these virtual communities through the use of social media tools and online profiles. They stated that social media sites are spaces where users are freely creating and connecting each other's profiles to make an interactive personal network. Other important findings from the study are that 66% of young people who have created a profile limit access to it and that 48% of them use social media tools daily or more frequently. Lenhart's more recent study found that Facebook is the most popular social networking tool used among American teens for sharing their life and learning experiences. Intrinsically, the other social media tools preferred and commonly used by them were YouTube, MySpace and Twitter for educational attainment regardless of sex and age specifically for higher education.

INDEPENDENT AND LIFELONG LEARNING

Social media tools represent promising learning resources by aiding learners to find each other by the traces they leave of their asynchronous activity and through their visible presence synchronously (Andersen, 2007; Arbaugh and Benbunan, 2007). Therefore, these

tools enable self-paced learners the opportunities to meet, work together and negotiate the time and place for their cooperative and independent learning (for an examination, peer study groups and rehearsing presentations). In addition, Armstrong and Franklin (2008) suggest that social media technologies support learners with enriched up-to-date virtual learning environments towards increased interactivity, enlarged community-building, the sharing and exchange of resources and the arrangement of productive learning tasks. Also, social media tools provide extra functionalities which can be easily accessed and applied by learners without extensive introduction or training.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored the important affordances inherent in the social media-based learning in influencing the learners' decisions on whether to use the tool in their learning. As presented, the social media tools have many benefits for educational opportunities especially beyond the classroom. In other words, it is the sociocultural needs of the learner-users and the transformation of patterns of their social interaction perceived as being resources of an engaging learning context. Overall with these outstanding and wide-ranging affordances in mind it is important to investigate the potentials of social media tools and how they may contribute to learning in the future.

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