

The Future of Social Learning: A Connectivist Approach to Using Social Technologies for Inclusive and Socially Responsible Education

TREO Talk Paper

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Abstract

The current education system imposes serious challenges to diverse learners (nontraditional majority) including students with racially, culturally, socioeconomically, intellectually and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Inclusive education, as a socially responsible education model, intends to address these challenges by enhancing dynamic but equal learning opportunities for *all* students regardless of their background and differences. Whereas many MIS programs have implemented inclusive strategies for some time, the move toward inclusive instruction using social learning and social technologies is relatively recent. Addressing this necessity, we suggest a set of integrated strategies for improving inclusive and socially responsible education. These strategies draw from a *connectivism* approach and set a foundation for transforming social learning using social technologies. The discussion will be supported by some examples from an MIS course at a state university.

Connectivism is characterized by its key principle that the capacity to learn is more important than what is currently being learned. In the connectivist approach, knowledge is distributed across networks, and therefore, learning occurs through navigating these networks and understanding connections. Connectivist learning is thus defined as a process of connecting information sources in which the ability to see these connections is the core learning skill. Connectivism, if implemented in a social context, demonstrates the potential for inclusive education due to its emphasis on diversity, flexibility, openness, and learner agency. This approach can also facilitate learners' knowledge discovery and formation through social activities enabled by empowerment, networking, interactivity, and social experimentation. The connectivism principles (*autonomy, openness, connectivity and diversity*) can be operationalized using social technologies to enable inclusive and socially responsible learning. To implement this new generation of social learning, we propose a new instructional model with four strategies—*social exploration, social ideation, social experimentation and social validation*—that can reach, engage and empower *all* students for productive learning experiences.

Social exploration extends the learning process beyond the classroom and into students' communities. Social exploration requires educators to encourage students' active participation in dynamic interest-based social exchanges beyond the classroom boundaries. Social exploration allows students to find and process knowledge in their own preferred way and define the value of knowledge in their own social context, when and where it is needed. Then, *social ideation* enables students to connect different disciplines and subjects across campuses and engage students to collaboratively ideate to address existing and emergent problems. Students may compete in proposing better solutions, but at the same time, collaborate to critically analyze their own or others' ideas. *Social experimentation* allows students to make predictions and elaborate on different aspects of the solutions by testing and evaluating hypotheses in a social setting. The most important complement of social experimentation is *social validation* when students publicly present the results of the experimentation and solicit feedback. These strategies help educators demonstrate the application of know-how and know-why in the students' sociopolitical environment.

By exploring the principles of connectivism and the application of social technologies, we propose a simple instructional model in supporting more effective and inclusive social learning. The systematic implementation of these strategies can facilitate inclusion, maximize engaged learning time, and diversify learning contents and approaches. By allowing students to explore problems from different perspectives and providing open learning opportunities via social feedback, these strategies have the potential to narrow the opportunity and achievement gaps for diverse learners while promoting socially responsible education.