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The theory of social learning and the impact on online education

Online courses seem to have solved the eternal debate between behavioral and cognitive theory by applying a hybrid approach to learning: the theory of social learning. But how do you create an online social dimension?

At the base of a training course, in the classroom and online, there is always a theory on learning. The theory of social learning by Albert Bandura seems the perfect synthesis between those who say that we learn because we respond to external stimuli and those who say that we learn because we process knowledge. The Canadian psychologist seems to go beyond the behavioral theory whose core is "I learn because a teacher tells me to repeat something" and the cognitive theory of "I learn because I think about input received", stating that learning is a social act.

We learn by observing and listening to others, colleagues, classmates or without anyone telling us to do it; we analyze the information, keep it and apply it when we need it most. What are the consequences of this theory in designing an online course? If it is true that we learn in a social context, how do we use the social element in eLearning?

What is social learning and what sets it apart from other learning theories

Albert Bandura's theory of social learning (1977) states that we learn through social interactions with our peers. We observe, listen, store and use information when we need it. According to behavioral theory, learning is a response to an external stimulus. To learn, behavior must be repeated: we learn from others if we are stimulated. By trivializing cognitive theory, learning goes beyond the response to a stimulus: it is a mental process in which we observe and reason about the consequences of the inputs. For the theory of social learning we learn from others by observing, analyzing and reasoning about what we need. In this sense it seems the perfect synthesis between the two learning theories.

Why transfer social learning into online education

When it comes to corporate training, the social interaction part occupies an important moment in employee training. Confronting oneself with colleagues allows one to learn from others, thinking about what one has seen and applying what one has learned in the moment of need. E-learning has all the tools to include social learning in education.

How to insert a social dimension within eLearning

Predicting a social dimension in a formal learning context can be a way to convey knowledge in a more natural way by leveraging peer interaction. Here are some ideas to apply social learning to eLearning:

- Provide discussion forums in online courses where students can interact with each other by answering the doubts of their classmates;
- Use videochat to make the exchange immediate and allow the students to interact with the voice and with the visual stimulus and not only with the writing;
- Adopt the flipped classroom approach, that is, flip the classic system in which you learn: first you do research on a certain topic independently and then discuss it in the classroom. In this way the concept of unidirectional teaching, which goes exclusively from the trainers to the students, is overturned.
- Provide blended, online and classroom training methods where group work is done in which each student is free to express his or her potential and learn from others.

Social learning is a learning theory according to which we learn in the social context by observing and analyzing the behavior of our peers and applying them when we need them. Including this social dimension within eLearning is essential to increase the involvement of learners. It is sufficient to provide social tools within the eLearning platform as discussion and video chat forums and to use mixed training techniques that include preparation before and after the lesson with work groups.