Social Learning in Higher Education

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The sector wide development of social learning spaces in Higher Education (HE) institutions is recognition of the important role that 'social learning' plays in contemporary HE. Following an empirical study, Matthews, Andrews & Adams (2011) concluded that social learning spaces can contribute to enhanced student engagement by fostering active learning, social interaction and belonging amongst students. The study also revealed that social learning helps to foster a sense of community amongst students in broad discipline based programs, promoting a supportive campus environment and greater overall satisfaction

Literature Review

• Bandura (1977) suggested that people learn from each other through observation, imitation and modelling. His theory has been described as a bridge between behaviourist and cognitive learning
• In Bandura's theory individuals that are observed are called models. Learners are surrounded by many influential models including parents, peers and within the family. (McLeod, 2016)
• Learners pay attention to these models and encode their behaviour. At a later time they may imitate the behaviour(s) they have observed or adopt practices they favour. (McLeod, 2016)
• Bandura referred to 'reciprocal determinism', that is, the world and an individual's behaviour cause each other. (Bandura, 1986)
• Matthews et al, (2011) identified assignment support as one of the more important aspects of social learning recognised by HE students
• Horsburgh & Ippolito (2018) see parallels between social learning and learning from role models in Biomedical science. He suggests that space for reflection, discussion and reinforcement among learners enhances the process of role model learning in clinical practice
• Ling & Fraser (2014) recognise the development and use of 'next generation social learning spaces' as a pedagogy in their own right. They suggest that teaching staff should plan the use of social learning spaces into their overall thinking.
• Lindsay et al (2011) report the positive effects of social learning for mental well being, This correlates with the enhanced 'sense of belonging' identified by Matthews et al (2011)

Discussion

Social learning in dedicated spaces is not traditional in the context of UK higher Education. Even so, it links strongly to Vygotsky's theory of social constructivism which is widely valued across the HE sector.
If we accept that conventional HE learning rotates around directed and non-directed activities that are largely individual, then social learning is all about a community. In social learning spaces, students come together to voluntarily exchange ideas, ask questions, provide answers and explore issues with one another. As Bandura (1977) described, learners learn from one another with each taking on the role of model while also learning from their peers.
This kind of learning is through interaction, rather than through traditional means thus extending the theory of constructivism into a new social dimension. In a sense, this type of learning has always played some kind of role in a student's educational journey even if that was simply as informal as a group of students discussing an assignment in the student union bar, however, social learning spaces give this approach its own pedagogy (Ling & Fraser 2014) and recognises it as an important part of the contemporary student experience.

Conclusions

There is strong and compelling evidence that social learning in dedicated new generation learning spaces is becoming an important part of contemporary HE pedagogy Modern day students see social learning as an integral part of their learning experience in UK higher education and the growing body of research around social learning theory extols the benefits of such practices from various perspectives. Matthews et al (2011) note an increase in student engagement and a more discernible sense of belonging among students which helps to cultivate a stronger sense of community. Other theorists such as Ling & Fraser (2014) see a new pedagogy emerging from the wide scale development of social learning spaces in UK institutions and highlight a strengthening of social constructivism as a result. There is little doubt that social learning now plays an important role in the HE student experience and with continued investment, the development of innovative methods for using such practices will continue to evolve over the coming years.

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