

The role of the “meaningful other” in online learners’ self-regulation

Liliana CUESTA^{a*}, Wen-chi Vivian WU^b

^aUniversidad de La Sabana, Colombia

^bProvidence University, Taiwan

*lilianamar@yahoo.com

Abstract: Social standards nurture individual self-efficacy beliefs. Such models influence learners’ performance in so that they can learn to recognize in others, alternate means to think, act, and do. One of these models is *the meaningful other*, whose role is explained in the present paper. Together with the implications that are unveiled through its discovery and recognition instances in online environments and the analysis of learners’ actions along this process, this paper attempts at examining how useful might such recognition process be in the self-regulatory actions of learners. It is expected that instructors and researchers raise awareness on the recognition of meaningful others in online settings, in order to establish sound pedagogical proposals that might assist learners and teachers towards the appraisal of more efficient self-regulatory actions and successful academic performances.

Keywords: meaningful other, self-efficacy, self-regulation, online learning, adult learning

1. Introduction

According to Bandura’s social cognitive theory principles (1986, 1997), there are four main sources that influence people’s beliefs about their efficacy: mastery experience, vicarious experience, social persuasion, and physical and emotional states. Zimmerman (2000) asserted that “self-efficacy is assumed to be responsive to changes in personal context and outcomes, whether experienced directly, vicariously, verbally, or physiologically” (p.88). With this in mind, there is a correlation between social influences and self-efficacy beliefs. This paper focuses on a target social model constructed by learners: the *meaningful other*.

A highly important source for people to obtain information about what they can do and strengthen their self-beliefs of efficacy is through the *vicarious experiences* provided by social models, generally obtained by observing the actions of other individuals, such as classmates, peers, and adults (Bandura, 1997). For Bandura (1997), the state of being instilled with feelings of capability while observing similar people succeed increases one’s self beliefs of having the competences to master similar activities. Similarly, to see other people fail—despite strenuous effort—diminishes the observers’ judgments of their own efficacy and destabilizes their efforts. Students can use this information to create their own expectations about their behavior and its future consequences. In academic environments, the influence of this source of self-efficacy is significant, especially when students are not sure about their own capabilities or when they have had a limited previous experience (Pajares, 1997). Drawing on the principle of effectiveness to use social standard models to influence one own’s performance, online instructors should be concerned about the ways in which learners observe and look for models in order to discover/boost their self-efficacy beliefs. This knowledge, in turn, might powerfully assist learners’ self-regulatory processes. Generally, such individuals that become reference points have desirable competencies which serve as knowledgeable standards of comparison and contrast. Such standards, for Bernstein and Crosby (1980) and Sorrentino and Higgins (1986), equate to the concept of the *meaningful other*: “a reference point is a factual standard defined by the performance or attributes of another individual who is meaningful to the evaluator, either because of the relevance or appropriateness of the individual’s attributes for social comparison” (p.27). In alignment with self-judgment actions (conceived within one of the sub-processes proposed by Bandura), individuals can discover themselves through *the other* by means of normative standards, which are mainly based on performance of *the other* and are usually acquired by observing models (Schunk, 1994, p.361).

In this study, the notion of the *meaningful other* addresses the online context; however, it should be remembered that this concept can be used in both online and offline settings. In the online context, the *meaningful other* is defined as the individual who is a reference point and/or standard to the learner in so that their performance or attributes are relevant and seem suitable to be imitated. Such attributes might include the meaningful other's exemplary academic performance (generally determined by a successful goal-setting and goal-attainment process); the capability to participate, socialize and engage in online discussions and/or activities by displaying exceptional communication and argumentation skills to express and reasonably support personal viewpoints; and the ability to lead and/or coach other peers by providing efficient support and maintaining an encouraging attitude to help them reach success.

2. Research Methods

The notion of the *meaningful other* was discovered and validated in a study conducted by Cuesta (2010). This qualitative study aimed at determining the effect of certain metacognitive instructional strategies in the self-regulation of a group of adult English-teacher trainees in a Master's program being taught through a virtual learning environment. Data was collected from their online postings (n=3028) over a four-month period in the university course management system (Moodle™). The students performed different tasks in this environment, including (but not restricted to) forum posts, class polls, short papers, presentations, and summaries. Protocols for online observation, checklists for online assessment, and questionnaires were administered to them. Data analysis was made following the grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), in which the use of a triangulation strategy was developed to ensure the validity of the study.

3. Findings and Discussion

Results in this study showed that participants often self-compared their performances with those of colleagues they considered similar to themselves or who they believed had slightly greater academic capacities. The majority of students reported a classmate as a *meaningful other*, and only a few identified the course instructor as a *meaningful other*. Both *others* provided participants with motivational incentives and resources to improve performances and skills. However, it was noteworthy that students did not overtly reveal the real identities of those individuals (except the instructor's); instead, they used certain codes to refer to them. This might indicate that learners were not yet prepared to explicitly recognize the *other's* perceived superiority and influence on them, and/or that they have not yet been trained in doing it. Additionally, participants reported having engaged in peer feedback actions in a meaningful way, given that the feedback gained was useful in generating individual challenge, progress, confidence, and feeling of satisfaction. For Bandura (1996), these aspects are essential for proving that there is significant value in considering vicarious experiences provided by social models since "the greater the assumed similarity the more persuasive are the models' successes and failures" (p.73). In the development of self-efficacy, models are useful for self-monitoring and identifying possible strengths and weaknesses. Individuals (like the ones in this study) care when their models represent an ideal and can use them as predictors for support and success. In these ways, their perceived self-efficacy might be influenced by the model behavior and its concomitant results. Findings also suggested the need for supplementary research associated with age, genre, and cultural differences.

All in all, in the quest for more self-efficacious students who are able to shape situations directed towards success and who can effectively control their own learning, suggests that the role of social persuasion from others (particularly teachers, and/or peers) should be further examined. It is proven that social persuasion alters students' confidence (Joët et al., 2011) and can generate engagement and efficiency in learning. In early stages, learners who look to evaluative judgments from others may be more easily influenced by what they tell them (Bandura, 1997). When learners receive discrediting comments from other people, their self-efficacy beliefs can be harmed (Pajares, 1997). Training learners and teachers to gain awareness that helps them respond effectively to the influences posed by the environment should be in the teaching and research agendas of educational stakeholders, so further investigation can be made across ages, language, and content areas

classrooms. Therefore, online instructors should nurture opportunities to exchange and mutually assess group, peer and self-performances by teaching learners to accept feedback constructively, using it to continue enhancing their performance. Instructors should also scaffold students as they learn to establish and pursue goals in accordance with three main criteria: specificity, proximity, and difficulty (Schunk, 2001). This in turn, might also suggest a further applicability of these criteria in personal and professional domains, as students learn to recognize what they *believe-can-do* and turn those beliefs in achievable *can-do* actions by monitoring their progress and assessing their capabilities. Lastly, online instructors should guide learners to recognize and accept their achievements and the achievements of others. In so doing, learners can become acquainted with practices that will help them understand and manage success (as well as to be prepared for possible risk or failure) conditions by observing and structuring their own pathways to attain goals and reach the expected outcomes.

In the same vein, learners and instructors are also called to foster true collaboration (Brindley et al., 2009), and be instilled with the sense of online community that Palloff and Pratt (2005) have suggested, as students might be encouraged to undertake collaboration actions that enhance their learning outcomes, by extending and expanding their learning experience, testing out new ideas by sharing them with a supportive group, and obtaining critical and constructive feedback.

All of the foregoing measures should gradually reduce learner isolation and dropout rates, phenomena which are likely to occur in the online environment. Additionally, these actions should not only foster the emergence of self-efficacious individuals who are able to control their actions and modify them at will for their own benefit, but also contribute to a more socially and affectively aware community of learners who can make use of the *other* as a mirror from which to learn.

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