

# Instructors' Opinions on Individual and Social Learning from Humanistic Perspective: A Preliminary Study

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**Abstract** Most of previous studies on the social learning consider only social influences on the social learning, but seldom address cognitive, humanistic and behavioral influences on the social learning, in particular, the instructors' opinions. This study focuses on investigating how the individual and social learning are affected by humanistic factors, the relationship between the two types of learning based on instructors' opinions. Through reviewing existing literature, we identified four categories of humanistic learning factors, including affective factors, cognitive factors, personalities, self-initiator and self-regulation ability at first. Then, the interview and the focus group discussion were conducted to collect the data about instructors' opinions on how the individual and social learning are affected by these four categories of humanistic factors and the relationship between them. The study results show that the instructors all agree that all the four categories of humanistic factors influence both the individual learning and the social learning and individual humanistic factors can be shared in the groups and directly influence the group learning. The individual learning and the social learning are dependent on each other and complement each other in the students' learning process. The study provides a comprehensive understanding about instructors' viewpoints on humanistic influences on the two types of learning and the relationship between them.

**Keywords** Learning Phenomenon, Individual Learning, Social Learning, Relationship, Humanistic Factors, Learning Theories

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## 1. Introduction

In order to improve students' learning, the instructor needs to understand what affects their learning. It is known that the learning process varies at an individual level (Glass & Muthu, 1999) while it may have common constituent elements. Individual learning is a process involving

individual's change on knowledge or behavior through experiencing the world (Novarese, 2012). Our daily experiences and recent academic findings (Fischer, 1999; Smith, 1999d, 2001) suggest that the learning also occurs in social experiences. The social learning means that people learn from each other via observation, imitation or modeling (Bandura, 1977).

This study focuses on the learning in college classrooms. In order to develop a better learning community, the instructors need to understand individual characteristics and social features that the learning process involves in the community, and the relationship between the two types of learning. There have been many studies on individual learning (Cronbach & Snow, 1977; Glass & Muthu, 1999; Melton, 1967; Smith, 1999a) and social learning (Fischer, 1999; Smith, 1999d, 2001) respectively, but not enough studies on the relationship between these two perspectives (Salomon & Perkins, 1998), neither the college instructors' opinions on the learning phenomenon.

According to previous studies by Smith (Smith, 1999c) and Merriam and other authors (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007), these learning theories can be classified as four categories, including the behavior oriented learning theories (Fischer, 1998; Hartley, 1998; Sherman, 1995), the cognitive learning theories (Cronbach, 1957; Martinez, 2001; Martinez & Bunderson, 2000)(Hartley, 1998), the humanistic learning theories (Carver & Scheier, 1992; Cronbach & Snow, 1977; Cropley, 1978; Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Flavell, 1976; Markkula, Perre, & Claeys., 2000; Martinez, 2001; McCann, 1995; McCombs, 1991; Rye, Wallace, & Bidgood, 1993), and the social/situational learning theories (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Salomon & Perkins, 1998; Smith, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978). The first three categories consider the learning phenomenon from the individual perspective, and the last one is from the social perspective. The social learning cannot be separated from the individual learning. The social learning theories always incorporate part of the individual learning theories, such as cognitive learning theories and behavior learning theories.

The long term goal of our study is to investigate the

learning phenomenon in college classrooms from all four perspectives (including the humanistic perspective, the cognitive perspective, the behavior perspective and the social perspective), and examine the relationship between the individual perspectives and the social perspectives. However, due to time limitation, this paper focuses on instructors' viewpoints on the two types of learning and the relationship between them from the humanistic perspective.

The remainder of this paper describes the overall design and data collection process, and also presents preliminary findings.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Research Questions

The goal of this study is, from the humanistic perspective, to study the instructors' opinions on the individual learning and social learning phenomenon in the classrooms and the relationship between them. The following research questions are designed for the goal:

- Question 1: According to the instructors, how humanistic factors influence the students' individual learning performance?
- Question 2: According to the instructors, how humanistic factors influence the students' social learning performance?
- Question 3: According to the instructors, how does the students' individual learning and social learning relate to each other?

### 2.2. Research Design

#### 2.2.1. Humanistic Learning Factors

As reviewed by Smith (Smith, 1999b, 1999c), the humanistic learning theories focus on the human potential for growth based on humanistic psychology. The purpose of the education is thought to self-actualized and autonomous and the educator's role is to facilitate the development of the whole person.

According to the existing humanistic learning theories (Smith, 1999b, 1999c), four categories of humanistic factors are mainly considered in the data collection,

including affective factors, conative factors, self-regulation ability, and personalities. Affective factors are the individual influences "resulting from the emotions, such as passion, frustration, satisfaction, distress, joy, fulfillment, gratitude, comfort, arrogance, or disinterest" (Martinez, 2001). The conative difference means individual differences on "basic strivings, intentions, motives, and will as expressed in behavior and actions. Motivation is a subset of this factor and means that a learner has an incentive or motive to learn." (Martinez, 2001). The self-regulation ability (or metacognition) describes one's knowledge regarding one's own cognition as well as controlling and monitoring one's own cognition (Flavell, 1976). A self-regulated learner accepts greater responsibility for his or her achievement. According to Carver and Scheier (Carver & Scheier, 1992), the personality consists of five superordinate factors, including extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability and autonomy.

The data to be collected mainly focused on these four categories of humanistic factors.

#### 2.2.2. Data Collection Methods

Instructors' opinions on the learning process in the classrooms are qualitative data. There are a verities of qualitative data collection methods, such as interview, focus group discussion, document analysis, observation, etc. (Silverman, 2000). Interview and focus group are two commonly used methods for qualitative research (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). In this study, these two methods were conducted to collect data for the study goal.

The interview was designed to elicit instructors' individual understanding about the two types of different learning phenomenon, while the focus group discussion was designed to complement individual understanding by group discussion. The focus group discussion was designed to help the individual instructors to exchange their viewpoints and discuss disagreement with each other (Schwab, 2016).

The questions designed in these two methods are the same. They are semi-structured, including both structured questions based on the previous humanistic learning theories and some open-ended questions. The major questions are given in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Major Questions in Interview and Focus Group Discussion

Individual Learning	Social Learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How long have you worked on the teaching position?</li> <li>• What course(s) are you teaching in this semester?</li> <li>• What kinds of courses have you taught before?</li> </ul>	
How does the emotion, like joy or sadness, frustration or satisfaction, of the student influence the learning? Can you give some examples?	How does the other people's emotion, like joy or sad, affect the student's learning?
How does the intention or motivation influence the student's learning? Can you give some examples to explain your answer?	How do the other people's motivations affect the student's learning?
How does the student's self-regulation ability affect the student's learning?	Comparing the learning in the individual student, can the group self-regulate the learning in the group?
How do the personalities, such as being more or less co-operative, careful or careless, active or passive, creative or not creative, of the student have influences on the student's learning? Can you give some examples?	How do you think that the nature of group, such as supportive, or competitive, affect the learning in the group?
How are the individual learning and the social learning related?	

### 2.3. Interview

The first author interviewed totally five participants, including four faculty members and one Teaching Assistant (TA) from one of the comprehensive big public universities in USA when she was a Ph. D student. They all taught courses in an Information Sciences and Technology School at the comprehensive university. That school was not divided into different departments. The courses that they taught were quite different and in different fields. One of the professors in the interview about individual learning has strong mathematics and computer science and engineering background and 38 years of long teaching experiences in these areas at universities. The other professor who was asked for individual learning questions had 25 years of teaching experiences on system design and development, and business systems management. One professor in the interview about social learning had broad background in human, social and political sciences and also had 38 years of teaching experiences in these areas. The other professor in the interview about social learning had business and software engineering background and had 14 years of teaching experiences in these areas. The TA had two years of teaching experiences and had done some lectures on lab tutorials for different technical courses in IST, such as database, and computer network.

Two of the faculty participants were interviewed with questions focusing on the individual learning and the relationship between the two types of learning. The other three participants were interviewed with questions focusing on the social learning and the relationship between the two types of learning. Each interview process was recorded as an audio file in a computer.

The interview began with the questions about their teaching background and expertise areas. These questions were asked to gain understanding about whether their teaching experiences and knowledge background would have some influences on their understanding of the learning phenomenon. Participants were then interviewed

with the questions about the individual/social learning phenomenon from the predetermined list of questions, which included the humanistic perspective questions outlined in Table 1 and the relationship related question.

### 2.4. Focus Group Discussion

The data collected from the interview above was limited. Some of the instructors gave only one or two sentences to some questions. We intended to collect more data on the learning phenomenon to answer our research questions. We thought that the focus group discussion would stimulate more discussion on each question and may be able to collect richer data. Therefore, the focus group discussion method was conducted after the first author became a faculty also in an Information School of another comprehensive university.

Three participant faculty members were recruited to join the focus group discussion about their viewpoints on the learning phenomenon. All of them worked at the Information School at the same university that the first author had worked at. They had been team-teaching an informatics introduction course for one semester. One of them came from Department of Computer Science, another was from Department of Communication, and the other was from Business Informatics. They each had six or longer years of teaching experiences in their own fields when they participated in the study.

The first author was the moderator during the focus group discussion process. The three participants were asked to discuss their viewpoints on the individual learning phenomenon at first, then, on the social learning phenomenon and finally on the relationship between the two types of learning phenomenon. The entire focus group discussion process was recorded with two different methods in order to secure our data recording. One was recorded with a laptop computer as digital audio files attached with Microsoft PowerPoint slides. The other was recorded with a video camera as digital video files, but

without recording the participants because one of them felt uncomfortable with video recording of their body movements.

## 2.5. Coding and Interpretation

The data collected from the interview and focus group discussion were first translated into text files. Then they were coded in terms of the humanistic factors listed the design. For example, the participants' answers are divided into two types of learning (individual learning and social learning) at first, then coded into the four categories of humanistic factors summarized from previous studies, including affective factors, conative factors, self-regulation abilities and personalities.

The interpretation of these data is reflexive. The first author has been a TA or faculty in the field of Information Sciences and Technology more than 15 years. The second author was a student in Computer Information Technology. Some factors and examples the participants talked during the interview or discussion can be found from the known learning theories, and some cannot, but they may also happen in the first author's teaching experiences or the second author's student learning experiences. As an instructor, the first author has observed how the students learn in the classrooms individually and in groups. As a student, the second author knows how he learns and observes how his classmates learn in the classroom individually and in groups. Their observation on learning in the classrooms helps them to understand and interpret the participants' answers related to the learning phenomenon. The data was interpreted based on both the authors' teaching/learning experiences and the existing learning theories.

## 3. Findings

This section summarizes the results in terms of the three research questions.

### 3.1. According to the Instructors, How Humanistic Factors Influence the Students' Individual Learning Performance?

#### 3.1.1. Affective Factors

All the instructor participants thought that keeping an appropriate emotion in the learning is important for the student's learning. There are varieties of emotional factors addressed by the participants.

Individual learning is definitely affected by the individual emotion. Sadness affects the student's learning. One interview participant said: *"The student's emotion definitely affects his or her learning... One concrete example is that at the beginning of this semester, one of my students got into troubles with his wife's early birth... His*

*mind is not in the class in the whole semester."* Another interview participant thought if the student is too excited or too joyful to concentrate on the class activities, he or she may also have problems learning in the class. All the participants thought that the student with appropriate passion on the course topic may engage in the learning better than the student with disinterests in the course topic.

#### 3.1.2. Conative Factors

All the participants agreed that motivation is one of important conative factors for the students' individual learning and they addressed how to motivate the students to learn. One interview participant emphasized this factor: *"... every student needs an appropriate motivation or intention to learn...At the beginning of each semester, I usually emphasize the purpose of learning is to learn, not the grade."* One participant talked what he would do to attract the student's interest in the course materials, such as *"show the job advertisement, here are some topics that we will cover in the class. Take the company people to the class; cover the topics that are important to the companies. can motivate the student to learn better"*. One of the interview participants thought that the extrinsic motivation may not work so well as the intrinsic does to the individual learning. He said: *"If they do not have interest from their heart, they cannot keep the extrinsic motivation held long."*

#### 3.1.3. Self-regulation Abilities

All the participants agreed that the individual self-regulation ability is important in individual learning, but instructors often need to force them to learn. One participant said: *"The most important thing is that you must have a good attitude to learn well, even if you do not have interests in the courses."* Another said: *"Of course, if he is self-discipline, he can learn better. Not many are self-discipline. Instructors need to force them to learn."*

#### 3.1.4. Personalities

Different aspects of individual personalities have different influences on individual learning. Two types of personalities, activeness and passiveness were mentioned a lot in the interview and the focus group discussion. The participants believed that if a student is active, he/she may actively react to the teacher's questions, actively communicate with the teacher to seek help, and actively participate in the class activities, which will facilitate his/her learning. If a student is passive, he/she may not want to think about the teacher's questions more deeply and may participate in the class activities passively, which all obstruct his/her learning. One participant also talked about the carefulness and carelessness. He thought that these two types of personalities certainly affect the learner's achievement, depending how the course was evaluated. One example given by him is about their influences in computer programming courses. Given that other abilities of the students are the same, the student who

is more careful may have better achievement in programming than the student who is more careless. He said: *"If the course is evaluated by understanding the concepts of programming, the carelessness may not hurt that student too much."*

### **3.2. According to the Instructors, How Humanistic Factors Influence the Students' Social Learning Performance?**

#### 3.2.1. Affective Factors

The emotional factors are also thought by the participants to be important to the social learning. They think that one member's emotion will affect the whole team's emotion, which further affects the group learning results. One interview participant said, *"Primate are social animals. People can pick up the emotion of other people very quickly. Other people also affect your emotion, bound to affect your learning"*. Another participant said, *"They are happy, the other can be influenced with good mood with higher efficiency."* The participants from the focus group agreed, *"One of the group members have a negative feeling that would affect the other people's learning because they don't like that attitude it will be destructive for their learning process."* One participant said: *"it is important to perceive in that way. ...I think students do tend to take what happens in the classroom personally."* He gave an example that one student complained about the other student's sleeping in the classroom. Another example was that two members of a student group came to the instructor and complained that a female student was always complaining. The two students asked her why and she said that she hated the class. The two students was hoping that the instructor *"to give them some magical answer and make her all of the sudden nice"*.

#### 3.2.2. Conative Factors

All of the participants also thought that the social learning is also affected by conative factors. They agreed that individual team members' motivation or intention could be shared in the group and affect other members so that the group learning behavior may be changed. One example given by the TA is that one student in a group intended to get a higher grade and he may push other students in that group to work harder, and therefore, the whole group may learner better and get better achievement. Another similar example given by the focus group is that a female student was ready into a group project and her intention was so *"contagious"* that more and more of the other group members got involved in that project and worked harder.

#### 3.2.3. Self-regulation Abilities

All of the participants also agreed that both individual self-regulation abilities and group self-regulation abilities are important for social learning. Individual self-regulation

abilities can help the individual members to fulfill the designated tasks in the group work, which will facilitate the group learning. In their opinions, only when the whole group works cooperatively with a common goal, the group can regulate the group behavior and actions. One participant thought that only when the group became a functional unit, the group could self-regulate itself and it is hard for the group to manage the group's self-regulation. The focus group participants all agreed that external pressure could motivate the group to learn and manage themselves. An example given by them is that the teacher can require the group to turn in a progress report about one third way toward the final project due and the group would have pressure to start working on the project earlier.

#### 3.2.4. Personalities

The instructors all agreed that different individual personalities have different influences on the group learning. For example, one participant talked about the more open or active students can influence the quiet students by seeking help from the quiet people so that the quiet people would have to talk in the group. This would initiate more discussion and information exchange in the groups and make the group learn better. They also agreed that most groups are supportive and some may be competitive. As to how the nature affects the group, they think that this depends on the personality combination of the group, although one of them thinks that competitive groups work better than supportive groups. They think the instructors need to assign groups with diverse personalities.

### **3.3. According to the Instructors, How Does the Students' Individual Learning and Social Learning Relate to Each Other?**

All the participants agreed that the individual learning and the social learning are dependent on each other and complement each other in the students' learning process.

Firstly, individual learning is the foundation of social learning, and the social learning is developed based on the individual learning. One participant said: *"The individual learning is foundation of social learning... If what you talk about is garbage, how can you communicate with other people? How can you contribute to the group?"* Some participants emphasized that the social learning is composed of individual learning. Only when the individuals in a group learn something, the group can be said that it has learned something.

Secondly, the individual learning begins with the social learning. One participant said: *"I do not believe that one can learn much without interacting with the environment, or the society."* In this case, the importance of social learning is emphasized as initiating the individual learning.

Thirdly, individual learning and social learning complement each other in a dynamic spiral cycle. They are in a reciprocal relationship. As is summarized above, good

individual learning can facilitate social learning by exerting each individual's influences on the group. Social learning can facilitate individual learning by providing interaction and observation contexts. One participant said that a group of individuals could definitely learn more than several individuals because different views from the group members could inspire other people to generate new ideas and new solutions.

#### 4. Discussion

The results from the interview and focus group discussion show that humanistic factors certainly affect both the individual learning and the social learning, but it is hard for the instructor to manage the humanistic factors in the classroom, especially in a large class.

The study has some limitations. First, the number of participants in the interview and the focus group are not very large to get rich data. Some participants in the study were not very talkative and their answers to my questions were pretty brief, the first author often needed to keep asking them to get more explanation. Secondly, the participants' teaching and knowledge background are very different although they all came from the information sciences and technology field. The students that they talked in the interview and group discussion were also from different majors. The diversity of the participants and the students result in the situation where the data we collected are hard to compare and analyze. Thirdly, the questions asked in the interview and focus group discussion focused on only the four categories of humanistic factors that were summarized from previous literature. Although the first author explained what each category mean and gave several examples, the participants often talked about one or two of them that they were interested in.

The participants talked a lot beyond the questions that were given to them. For example, several personality concerns toward the social learning were raised by the participants. First, they all think that combination of members with different personalities and diverse background is one of the central concerns in the social learning. One focus group participant talked about his experiences about conducting personality or background survey before assigning groups. Then he would assign the group members based on the survey result. He usually assigns students with different personalities/background to a group and would not assign all talkative students in the same group. Second, they also think that how to work with team members with different personalities is an important issue for the social learning. One participant gave an example about how a group in his classes dealt with a group member who was shy. In that group's discussion, the other group members often asked him to speak first, otherwise he would not speak much. Third, another participant mentioned that the group must manage to get everybody involved in the group to work. Otherwise, the

group learning may have problems. Another example is that the focus group participants talked not only the students' emotion, but also the instructors' emotion. They all agreed that the instructors' emotion also influences the students' learning.

#### 5. Conclusions

Few previous studies investigated both the instructors' opinions on the individual and social learning phenomenon, especially on the relationship between them, although there are many studies on each of them. This paper describes our study about instructors' viewpoints on the individual and social learning phenomenon and relationship between them. Most of the previous studies on social learning consider only social influences on social learning. This study focuses on instructors' opinions on humanistic influences on both types of learning.

The study results show that the instructors all agree that all the four categories of humanistic factors influence both the individual learning and the social learning and individual humanistic factors can be shared in the groups and directly influence the group learning. Keeping appropriate emotion is important for the learning. Being too sad or too joyful can distract the students from learning. They also think that the intrinsic motivation works better to improve both individual learning and social learning than extrinsic motivation, although the instructors often need to give the student extrinsic stimulation, such as showing them the needs on the job market. They also agreed that it is hard for the individuals/groups to have self-regulation abilities and the instructors often need to give them external pressures. They think that it is important to keep appropriate personality combination in a group and manage how to deal with different personalities in a group.

The study findings also show that the individual learning and the social learning contribute to each other. The group can learn only if individuals contribute to the group. The individuals can learn through interacting with or observing others.

This paper summarizes the learning phenomenon only from the humanistic perspective due to time limitation. We have also collected data about the cognitive and behavior influences on learning phenomenon. We plan to report the results from the other two perspectives later.

We collected data only from the instructor participants and presented only the instructors' views on the two types of learning phenomenon. In the future, we are also planning to explore what the students think affect their learning and also compare the views from the students and the instructors.

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