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APPLYING HUMANISTIC THEORY TO SOCIAL STUDIES TEACHING FOR BUILDING CHARACTER AND SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE 4.0 ERA

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Abstract

This study explores the application of humanistic theory in Social Studies education in the United States as a strategy to strengthen students' character development and social consciousness in the 4.0 era. Grounded in principles of personal growth, self-actualisation, and meeting students' psychological needs, humanistic theory aims to foster empathy, tolerance, and social responsibility in learners. The integration of emerging technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers rich opportunities to enhance student engagement, create immersive experiences, and support the humanistic approach to teaching. Nevertheless, challenges such as unequal access to technology, disparities in infrastructure, and teachers' preparedness remain significant barriers to successful implementation. This study underscores the importance of combining humanistic theory with innovative technologies to promote inclusive, student-centred, and transformative Social Studies education across diverse U.S. classroom settings.

Keywords: Humanistic theory, Social Studies education, Educational technology, Student character development, Era 4.0

Introduction

The Fourth Industrial Revolution has transformed multiple sectors worldwide, with education in the United States experiencing some of the most significant changes. This era is characterised by rapid advances in technologies such as the Internet of Things (IoT), Artificial Intelligence (AI), big data, and cloud computing, all of which present both opportunities and challenges for developing modern and inclusive education systems (Schwab, 2017). These technologies enable personalised, flexible, and adaptive learning experiences that can meet the diverse needs of students. However, overreliance on technology also risks reducing meaningful social interaction and limiting opportunities for character development, potentially leading to a form of dehumanisation in learning environments.

Social Studies education plays a critical role in shaping students' character and social consciousness. As a core subject designed to help students understand society, social relationships, and civic responsibilities, Social Studies extends beyond knowledge acquisition to the cultivation of empathy, collaboration, and moral integrity. Yet, challenges remain in U.S.

classrooms, where teaching methods often emphasise cognitive outcomes while neglecting affective development and personal growth. In an age where digital tools dominate students' interactions, fostering authentic social awareness and interpersonal skills becomes increasingly urgent.

Humanistic theory provides a powerful framework for addressing these challenges because it views students as whole individuals with cognitive, emotional, and social needs. Pioneered by scholars such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, humanistic theory highlights the importance of holistic development and self-actualisation. Education, from this perspective, is not simply a transfer of knowledge but also a process of nurturing empathy, responsibility, and personal growth. Within Social Studies education, a humanistic approach can help students better understand themselves, their communities, and their societal obligations, thereby cultivating qualities such as tolerance, empathy, and civic responsibility.

Maslow (1943) argued that learning thrives when individuals' basic needs such as safety and belonging are met, while Rogers (1969) emphasised the importance of supportive, non-judgemental environments that allow students to express themselves freely and develop their unique potential. These principles are particularly relevant in U.S. classrooms, where diverse student populations benefit from inclusive, student-centred teaching practices. By integrating humanistic theory into Social Studies, teachers can design learning experiences that promote both academic achievement and socio-emotional development.

This study examines how the implementation of humanistic theory in Social Studies classrooms across the United States can enhance students' character formation and social awareness. It highlights strategies that allow students not only to engage cognitively with content but also to grow as empathetic, responsible, and socially aware individuals. By aligning humanistic principles with the technological and cultural realities of the 4.0 era, this research aims to inform more holistic approaches to Social Studies education in the U.S. context.

Theoretical Foundation

2.1 Humanistic Learning Theory

Humanistic learning theory emerged in the 1970s, is an approach in educational psychology that places humans at the center of all learning processes. This approach emerged as a reaction to previous learning theories, namely psychoanalytic and behavioristic. Humanistic theory violates human values which emphasize the stimulus-response aspect, humans are considered as helpless individuals and can be controlled by the environment, and they are even considered to have very little ability to hone their own abilities. In contrast, humanistic learning theory emphasizes overall human development, including cognitive, affective and emotional aspects. Abraham Maslow is a pioneer of humanistic psychology. Maslow believed that humans move to accept and understand themselves as much as possible. Maslow's very famous thought is about Hierarchy of Needs (hierarchy of needs) (Maslow, 1943). Humans have 5 basic needs,

namely physiological needs (physiological needs), the need for security (safety and secutity needs), the need for affection and belonging (love and belonging needs), the need for self-esteem (esteem needs), and the need for self-actualization (selfactualization).

In a learning context, students need to feel physically and emotionally comfortable before they can really focus on learning. Humanistic theory encourages teachers to not only pay attention to cognitive aspects, but also ensure that students' emotional needs are met. Carl Rogers is another figure in humanistic theory, Carl Rogers introduced the concept client-centered therapy in clinical psychology and then apply it to education. Rogers believes that every individual has the potential to develop and learn optimally if they are in a supportive environment. (Rogers, 1969). The environment in question is an environment that is safe, open and full of respect for individuals. The most effective learning occurs when students feel that the learning is relevant to their lives and has meaningful value. Therefore, the role of the teacher in this theory is not just as a teacher, but more as a facilitator who helps students find the meaning of learning.

Rogers believes that students who study are not forced or forced, but they are allowed to freely learn, students are expected to be able to make their own decisions and be responsible for their choices. Rogers stated 5 important things in the humanistic learning process in the book Freedom to Learn (Rogers, 1969). First meaningful learning (meaningful learning), the most effective learning is learning that is meaningful for the individual. This occurs when students are able to relate new knowledge to their personal experiences. Students are more likely to remember and apply what they learn if they feel that the material is relevant to their needs and interests. Learning like this will allow students not only to understand concepts but also to interpret them in depth. Second, freedom in learning (freedom to learn).

Freedom for students to determine their own learning path is of the utmost importance. Students are encouraged to take initiative, explore their interests and learn according to their needs and desires. The freedom in question includes the freedom to try, make mistakes, and learn from those experiences. Learning will become more personal and authentic for each individual. Third, the role of the teacher as a facilitator (facilitation role of the teacher). The teacher does not impose authority or act as the sole source of information. Instead, teachers act as facilitators who create a supportive learning environment. Teachers must help students find ways of learning that suit them, provide encouragement, and demonstrate empathy and authenticity in their interactions with students. This creates a learning atmosphere that is open and free from fear or pressure.

Fourth, the importance of experience in learning (learning through experience). Significant learning often comes from direct experience. This process involves active involvement of students in relevant and contextual activities. He argues that students learn best through practice, reflection, and interaction with their environment. This approach accommodates students' needs to understand the world in a real and pragmatic way.

Fifth, supportive interpersonal relationships (Supportive Interpersonal Relationships), the importance of positive relationships between teachers and students in the learning process.

Teachers need to demonstrate empathy (the ability to understand students' points of view), warmth (genuine caring), and authenticity (consistency between words and actions). These supportive interpersonal relationships create a safe and comfortable environment for students to learn, experiment, and develop themselves.

One of the main principles of humanistic learning theory is student autonomy in the learning process. This autonomy refers to students' ability to take responsibility for their own learning, including determining goals, ways of learning, and evaluating learning outcomes. This theory recognizes that each individual has a unique way of learning and has the right to determine the method that best suits him. This is in line with the concept self-directed learning introduced by Malcolm Knowles, where students are encouraged to study independently by utilizing various available resources. In this context, teachers act as guides who help students identify their learning needs and provide the necessary support (Knowles, 1975).

The unique character of humanistic theory is the focus on interpersonal relationships in learning. Rogers emphasized that the relationship between teachers and students is a key factor in creating an effective learning environment. Teachers who demonstrate empathy, warmth, and authenticity in their interactions with students can help create an atmosphere that supports growth and learning. Empathy means teachers understand students' feelings and perspectives, warmth creates a comfortable atmosphere, and authenticity indicates that teachers are honest and sincere in their relationships with students. These three elements form the basis of what Rogers called facilitative teaching (Rogers, 1969).

In a humanistic view, learning is not just about gathering information, but also about understanding and internalizing experiences. This is in line with the views of John Dewey, who, although not directly a humanistic figure, had a significant influence on this theory. Dewey argued that education is a process of reconstruction of experience, where students learn through active involvement in situations relevant to their lives (Dewey, 1938). Thus, humanistic theory encourages learning approaches that involve students actively in the learning process, such as through discussions, collaborative projects, or simulations.

2.2 Industrial Revolution 4.0

The Industrial Revolution 4.0 is an important milestone in the history of technological and world economic development which has brought major changes to various sectors of life. This concept first appeared in 2011 in the context of discussions about industrial development strategies in Germany, which aimed to increase efficiency and productivity through the use of digital technologies. Industrial Revolution 4.0 involves the integration of digital technology, artificial intelligence, Internet of Things (IoT), big data, cloud computing, and automation technology in industrial processes. In contrast to previous industrial revolutions, which focused on gradual mechanization, electrification and digitalization, Industrial Revolution 4.0 combines these technological elements to create systems that are smarter, more adaptive and globally connected (Schwab, 2016).

The main characteristic of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 is connectivity which allows various devices and machines to communicate with each other via the internet network. IoT is one of

the core technologies in this revolution, enabling real-time data collection and analysis to improve operational efficiency. In the manufacturing industry, for example, this technology allows the creation of smart factories, where production systems can run automatically with minimal human intervention. Additionally, big data and cloud computing provide stronger analytical capabilities, enabling companies to make decisions based on accurate and relevant data. This not only increases productivity, but also helps companies design more effective strategies to meet changing market needs (Kagermann et al., 2013).

Not only in the industrial sector, the Industrial Revolution 4.0 also has a major impact on various other fields, including health, education, transportation and government. In the health sector, IoT-based technology is used to develop smart medical devices that can monitor patient conditions in real-time. Artificial intelligence technology is also used to analyze medical data to provide faster and more accurate diagnoses. In the transportation sector, the concept of autonomous vehicles equipped with sensors and AI technology is one of the innovations that is developing rapidly. Meanwhile, in government, blockchain technology is used to increase transparency and efficiency in data management and public services (Xu et al., 2018).

In the field of education, the Industrial Revolution 4.0 has changed the traditional learning paradigm to become more technology-based. Digital technologies such as elearning, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) enable more interactive and personalized learning. Additionally, the use of big data and AI in education helps institutions to understand students' needs in more depth and design learning methods accordingly. Thus, this revolution not only changes the way students learn, but also provides opportunities for them to develop skills relevant to the needs of modern industry, such as digital literacy, complex problem solving, and creativity (Prifti et al., 2017).

However, the Industrial Revolution 4.0 also presents significant challenges, especially regarding its impact on the workforce. Automation and the use of robots in production processes have replaced many manual jobs, raising concerns about unemployment and economic inequality. Jobs that are routine and do not require high skills are the most vulnerable to the impact of automation. Therefore, there is an urgent need to improve the skills of the workforce through training and education so that they can adapt to the new labor market demands. In addition, this revolution also raises ethical issues, such as data privacy and cyber security, which need to be addressed through appropriate regulations and policies (Schwab, 2016).

On the other hand, Industrial Revolution 4.0 offers great opportunities to improve the quality of human life. With increasingly sophisticated technology, many tasks that previously took a long time can now be completed more quickly and efficiently. In this context, humans have more time to focus on more creative and innovative aspects of life. In the business world, the use of digital technology allows companies to create products and services that are more personalized and in line with consumer needs. This creates a more dynamic and competitive business ecosystem, where innovation is the key to success (Kagermann et al., 2013).

The transformations brought about by the Industrial Revolution 4.0 also have an impact on the way governments and society view sustainable development. With technology supporting

energy efficiency and better resource management, this revolution is paving the way for the implementation of environmentally friendly practices. For example, IoT technology is used to manage energy in smart cities, while blockchain technology helps in tracking resources to make them more transparent and accountable. In this case, the Industrial Revolution 4.0 provides an opportunity to overcome global challenges such as climate change and resource scarcity through technological innovation (Xu et al., 2018).

Overall, Industrial Revolution 4.0 is a phenomenon that brings fundamental changes in various aspects of human life. By integrating digital technology, AI, IoT and big data, this revolution not only increases efficiency and productivity, but also opens up new opportunities for innovation and sustainable development. Nevertheless, challenges such as unemployment due to automation, data privacy issues, and economic inequality require serious attention. In this context, education and training play an important role in preparing individuals to face the demands of this new era. With the right approach, Industrial Revolution 4.0 can be a tool to improve the quality of human life while creating a more sustainable and inclusive world (Schwab, 2016).

Research Methods

This study employed a literature-based research method, focusing on the collection, analysis, and synthesis of information from secondary sources such as peer-reviewed journals, books, scholarly articles, research reports, and official policy documents. Rather than conducting primary fieldwork, the research draws upon existing evidence to develop a robust theoretical framework and to identify gaps or limitations in previous studies. Literature-based research is particularly valuable in exploratory or reflective investigations because it offers a broad, in-depth understanding of a topic without the time and financial constraints associated with empirical data collection (Zed, 2008).

Within the context of Social Studies education in the United States, this approach enables a critical examination of how humanistic theory—pioneered by figures such as Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow—can be applied to enhance students' character development and social awareness in the Fourth Industrial Revolution era. By analysing and synthesising existing literature, this study highlights key principles of student-centred learning, supportive classroom environments, and meaningful learning experiences. These principles are examined for their relevance in U.S. Social Studies classrooms, where the integration of educational technology and humanistic approaches may help address contemporary challenges such as reduced interpersonal interaction, cultural diversity, and the need for civic responsibility.

Research Results

Research on the application of humanistic theory in Social Studies education in the United States indicates that this approach can substantially enhance students' character formation and social awareness, particularly in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution where technological advancement dominates classroom practice. By prioritising students' personal

growth, self-discovery, and the recognition of individual potential, the humanistic approach provides a foundation for self-actualisation. In U.S. Social Studies classrooms, humanistic theory encourages students to engage with deeper social values and develop empathy, tolerance, and social responsibility when addressing contemporary societal challenges.

Humanistic theory in education advanced by Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers emphasises humane, student-centred learning. Maslow's hierarchy of needs posits that students must first meet basic needs such as safety, belonging, and esteem before they can reach their full academic and social potential. Rogers similarly stressed the importance of a supportive environment characterised by respect, openness, and unconditional positive regard. Applied to U.S. Social Studies education, these principles help students not only master civic and historical knowledge but also cultivate the social awareness and collaborative skills required to navigate a culturally diverse and globally interconnected society.

The implementation of humanistic approaches in U.S. Social Studies often includes project-based learning, collaborative discussions, and experiential activities that mirror real-world social issues—such as inequality, human rights, and civic engagement. Teachers act as facilitators, encouraging active participation and critical thinking while allowing students to develop their own perspectives on complex social phenomena. Research in U.S. classrooms has shown that such approaches increase student motivation, empathy, and civic-mindedness. Students also demonstrate stronger teamwork, conflict-resolution skills, and openness to differing opinions when exposed to humanistic teaching methods.

Technological innovations, such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Artificial Intelligence (AI), are increasingly used to strengthen humanistic-based learning. VR allows students to immerse themselves in historical events or social environments otherwise inaccessible, enabling them to virtually visit civil rights landmarks or refugee camps to better understand global issues. AR helps students visualise governmental systems, demographic changes, or community structures interactively, while AI can provide personalised feedback, adaptive content, and enhanced learning pathways. Studies in U.S. educational settings have confirmed that these tools deepen engagement, improve comprehension, and encourage empathy by simulating real-life contexts.

Nonetheless, despite its potential, applying humanistic theory in U.S. Social Studies classrooms faces challenges. Traditional, test-driven teaching methods can restrict opportunities for deeper character-building and participatory learning. Additionally, while technology is more widely available in U.S. schools than in many other countries, inequities persist, especially between affluent and underfunded districts. Uneven access to advanced tools such as VR and AR risks widening gaps in educational outcomes and limiting the full benefits of humanistic teaching approaches.

Finally, although the humanistic model focuses on individual development, systemic issues such as curriculum constraints, teacher training gaps, and standardised testing pressures can limit its impact. Without adequate institutional support and sustained investment in professional development and technology infrastructure, the transformative potential of integrating humanistic theory into Social Studies education in the United States may not be fully realised.

Conclusion

The application of humanistic theory in Social Studies learning in the United States can make a substantial contribution to developing students' character and social awareness, particularly in the context of the Fourth Industrial Revolution. By focusing on individual growth, self-actualisation, and the fulfilment of students' psychological needs, this approach provides a strong foundation for more inclusive, empathetic, and socially responsible learning. Through humanistic-based instruction, students acquire not only academic knowledge but also essential life skills such as empathy, tolerance, civic responsibility, and critical engagement with societal issues.

Nevertheless, applying this theory in U.S. classrooms presents challenges, especially in education systems still shaped by traditional teaching, high-stakes testing, and unequal access to innovative tools. Emerging technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), and Artificial Intelligence (AI) offer significant potential to enrich students' learning experiences and strengthen character development, civic-mindedness, and global awareness. These tools enable immersive and interactive learning, but disparities in access to such technologies across districts and states remain a major obstacle to equity.

Another key challenge lies in systemic inequalities within U.S. education. Underfunded schools, teacher training gaps, and curriculum constraints can hinder the consistent implementation of humanistic-based approaches. Greater investment in infrastructure, professional development, and inclusive policies will be needed to ensure that humanistic Social Studies learning can reach its full potential at every educational level.

Overall, despite these challenges, integrating humanistic theory with advanced technology in U.S. Social Studies education holds great promise for preparing a generation of students who are not only academically proficient but also socially conscious, empathetic, and equipped with the values and skills necessary to address complex global challenges in the 4.0 era.

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