The Online Learning Environment: a Personal Experience of Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

This paper underlines how CMC (Computer Mediated Communication) collaboration could enhance adult learners self-development and self growth. Assuming "Constructivism Theory" and the "Self-Directed Learner" as the basis of this personal reflection, I will highlight the two sides of the argument; my experience of collaboration was both an active, an interactive, as well as an equal process but it also required great effort and personal change. It overcame the traditional individualistic model of learning, supporting and establishing further relationships among participants. However, in my personal view, it required a more effective organizational tool, in order to overcome the sense of confusion and lack of human presence, which was strong when working collaboratively online.

Keywords

Collaboration, agreement, Constructivism, self-directed learner, self-grown, group work.

INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses its attention on my personal experience of collaboration as learner in an online course named "New Technology and Lifelong Learning." The Module was part of MSc in Adult & Continuing Education, which I attended at Glasgow University (Scotland - UK), from October 2000 to August 2001. The course was carried out completely via distance by two tutors, with ten participants and it was created as a self-reflective module. I personally considered the module as a way of rethinking the experiences had as an online learner, in terms of being a future online tutor, which was the main aim of the course.

The online course was organised in two parts: the first which comprised four to five moments of "Common Discussion" both in big and in small groups and the second which supported a "Collaborative work group." While the former referred to the online communication between participants and tutor, the latter consisted of individual research leading to the creation of a final Common Project. I might say that the two learning moments were based on topics chosen by each participants, from titles presented by the tutor. Thus, the tutor owned a role of Mediator and/or Facilitator in the "Group Work," and the group organized itself in an independent way. What was more, the interaction among participants was based on the use of CMC.

SOME DEFINITIONS

First of all, some clarifications in respect to the terms used in this paper are necessary in order to make the context of analysis clearer to the readers. Thus, I will start defining here in McConnell terms the collaborative and co-operative aspects of a learning process as a way of becoming part of a knowledge community and as a way to solve problems together (McConnell, 1994). Hence, I will use the term collaboration referring to both of the meanings. What is more, Harasim added that it could refer as well to "any activity that in which two or more people work together to create meaning, explore a topic, or improve skills" (Harasim et. All, 1995, p. 30).

The latter definition seems to refer to concrete cases, which also relates to the experience described in this work.

Further, in order to better clarify the meaning of the term "Group" I would consider here the Mc Collom and Gillette vision:

"A group is defined here by individual members' experience, by the relationships among members, and by members' relations with non-members. The new tradition we describe here requires maintaining a complex view of the simultaneous influences on group dynamics created at different levels of the social system in which the group exists" (McConnell, 2000, p.14).

Thus, "the group collaboration" is influenced both by the views of the people who are in the group and by what is happening in their daily life outside.

In describing my personal experience, I will use these meanings referring to the online learning environment, and its relation with the New Technologies. Hence, I will analyze CMC as the main tool as in the context above. According to Berge & Collins (1995), CMC was conceived as a way of exchanging thoughts, ideas, and information in a form of asynchronous communication, via a computer keyboard and screen, connected to other computers. In this way it is possible to transfer text and pictures as well as carrying out a conversation without being at there at same time at the same place. In this paper, the use of CMC in Distance Courses will be considered as a Group Conference, where a "many-to-many communication" will prevail (Feemberg, 1989). Messages posted by someone, and stored in a virtual folder, are read by all the participants of the conversation. What is more, the term "Webboard" will refer to the platform installed to perform the use of CMC.

Finally, in order to better understand what really happened while more people worked together, in the next section, I will consider the concepts which more clearly explained this particular experience.

FROM CONSTRUCTIVISM TO THE SELF-DIRECTED LEARNER

In this section, I will take into consideration the "Constructivism Theory" as the most relevant in this argument and its relation with the concept of "Self-Directed Learner" as related to my experience.

First of all, the theory of "Constructivism" asserts that knowledge is something which is "constructed" through discussion and interaction among peers. Hence, it is possible to build new meanings through the exchange and the elaboration of the different ideas (Harasim, 1989). This implies that knowledge is not something owned by few individuals but something which is owned by everybody. What is more, it means that knowledge is not absolute, but something which needs to be continuously negotiated between two or more people.

I would consider Constructivism at the basis of my experience, because each activity was based on "Group Discussion " or on "Group Work, " I realized that my ideas were important to help build up the thoughts of the others and viceversa. The course did not have any predetermined content, but topics were to be developed depending on our own interests. It was a common process of creation, which started from each individual yet influenced the group as a whole.

However, in my view, knowledge was something that came from above. I was quite surprised observing that in the course there was no "given content" at all and that we had to work together in order to create it. Indeed, I always considered myself an independent learner (Ryan, 2000), somebody who could organize her own work by herself, without the help and the support of anybody, because this was the way I used to study both during the Secondary School and at the University. At the beginning, I found it particularly difficult to participate in "Common Discussions" with peers whom I really did not know. I had to share thoughts and ideas that I always used to keep for myself. What was more, I felt a bit uncomfortable and shy, knowing that my written messages might be read and criticized by the whole class. This is one of the reasons why, in a traditional face-to-face meeting (a class where learners meet personally) , I used to not participate actively in a group discussion. McConnell points out that in CSCL (Computer Supported Co-operative Learning) not all the students wish to participate in collaborative learning methods: "The open learning environment of CSCL demands a certain kind of openness in the communications of those involved" (McConnell, 1994, p. 84-85).

However, starting on working in the small group discussion with other students, I realized that the exchange of opinions was very useful for me in order to better reflect on some issues, to reach common agreements and to develop new positions. The "Openness" of this environment certainly helped me a lot. Indeed, I was stimulated by the behavior of other people who were more willing to share their personal points of view in the online class. The "Informality", as the way as participants talked about topics not related to the learning setting, helped me to be more open and friendly during the collaboration and the discussion. The paradox was that at the end, I participated more actively in the online discussion than in a face-to-face one. My experience is supported again by a McConnell thought that states: "Co-operative learning involves working together on some task or issue in a way that promotes individual learning through processes of collaboration in group. It is the opportunity to learn through the expression and exploration of diverse ideas and experiences in co-operative company" (McConnell, 1994, p. 8).

In this kind of environment, the leader was no more the tutor (as in a traditional face-to-face class) but the group of individuals working together as "Self-Directed Learners" (Graebner, 1998) (Berge & Collins, 1995). The latter should perform, more or less, some of the intellectual functions of the teacher and act in order to manage the work in the learning process (Shirley, A. Et. all, 1997). During the course, the participants were no more taught by the teacher but simply "lead" by the tutor. In my case, for

example, the tutor gave a framework for the group work, but "Information Gathering" was a typical skill reserved to us as Self-Directed Learners (Feltovich et. all, 1995). What is more, in the group work one of the students was directed to coordinate the whole project, assuming the tutor's role as Mediator/Facilitator. In a study on collaboration in a web-based environment, Oliver & Omari (2001) observed the same kind of behavior among respondents, even when not told to do so.

Hiltz's thoughts better summarizes all the points raised in this paragraph:

"In collaborative learning, instruction is learner-centered rather than teacher-centered and knowledge is viewed as a social construct, facilitated by peer interaction, evaluation and cooperation. Therefore, the role of the teacher changes from transferring knowledge to students (the "sage on the sage") to being a Facilitator in the students' construction of their own knowledge (the "guide on the side")" (Hiltz, 1998).

On the other hand, I do think that the presence of the tutor was essential, because working in a group for a "Collaborative Project" we needed to be told how to organize the work, how to share the topics, what information to be gathered and how to put our piece of work together. Indeed, Harasim (1989) points out that one of the critical areas in the online collaboration field refers to the need of tools, which facilitate organization of the corpus of information generated in the online environment. I would add, that a good "Action Plan" for the group is also essential in order to better collaborate and overcome both the sense of confusion present when working together, and the high drop out rate which is typical of online courses. Oliver & Omari (2001) demonstrated that , if the learning process was not well structured, the size of the achievements gains obtained from online teaching mediated by collaboration and self-directed learning, were less then those achieved in a face-to-face classroom. They pointed out that some learners can experience difficulties with self-directed learning activities, because they depend on their abilities to self-monitor and self-regulate, which are utilized in different ways by different people.

Although at the end I experienced the positive value of collaboration, I cannot assume that the other learners agree with my position.

THE GROUP COLLABORATION EXPERIENCE

In this section, I will focus on the group collaboration as the most enjoyable moment of the course, in respect to the creation of the "Collaborative Project". I will consider both my experience and its relation with the most relevant authors in the field, supporting both positive and negative facets.

My first experience on the group work was not so good. I would assert that, at the very beginning I met some problems linked to the relationship with my peers, because I had to adapt my personal rhythm to the one owned by the team group. My peers and I, having different daily timetables, we communicated in different time during the day and so, sometimes it was a little bit frustrating for me waiting for answers that were not already in the Webboard. Authors as Feenberg (1989) who calls this typical online phenomenon as "Communication Anxiety" also support this fact.

However, overcoming this inconvenience and working with my peers, I experienced a new way of learning. People helped each other in a common process of collaboration, where it was possible to take inspiration from other people's ideas and suggestions in order to improve our work. For example, one of my colleagues sent the group a small paper related to "Critical Thinking", which I found very useful in writing my Project. Thus, the process of "sharing," both in terms of resources and in terms of common creation, underpinned that in a learning context working in group is more productive than working alone and that co-operation is more useful than competition. The former assumption is supported by Hiltz, in her studies. She states that with the use of collaborative learning strategies, students are more involved in the course, student satisfaction with the classroom experience is enhanced and their achievement is promoted as well (Hiltz, 1998). In my case, I really felt more involved in the work because I was creating something original based only on my interest and my being helped by other people. From a status of traditional passive learner, I moved on to experience the active role of creator, enhancing the environment important for the development of new cognitive skills (Harasim, 1989). Thus, I learnt more with the contribution and feedback of my fellows than writing my essay alone. This helped me increase my competence in working with others (McConnell, 1994).

Harasim (1989) who stated that collaboration is not only active but also interactive with the sharing of information, ideas, opinions and the reciprocal exploration of issues and arguments, supports my assumption. However for this reason, "Cooperative Learning" is not only a collective process but also an individual one, because the learning team members monitor each other since the individual's performance impacts the group's grade (Klemm, 1995). It is stressed that people are more willing to do good work than the contrary.

It might be for this reason that in this kind of environment I worked more collaboratively than competitively. The former was very important in terms of personal growth and learning process. What is more, McConnell affirms that the traditional individualistic educational system maintains competition and envy. Hence he takes into consideration the "Prisoners' Dilemma Game", which is when players have to cooperate or defect but if they defect, they will do worse than if they had cooperated. In conclusion,

cooperation always benefits both players, because both of them can gain benefits if a reciprocal collaboration develops (McConnell, 1994). This is one of the reasons why I mostly agree with Harasim (1989) when she asserts that in this kind of environment, communication among class members is more equitably distributed than in a typical face-to-face classroom, where the teacher or one student may dominate the discussion. All the participants can equally gain from the collaborative process; all of them own the same opportunity to be an active part of the learning situation. Each contribution is essential for the group work.

Hence, Johnson and Johnson affirm that: "Generally achievement is higher in co-operative situations than in competitive or individualistic ones and that co-operative efforts result in more frequent use of higher-level reasoning strategies.... than do competitive or individualistic efforts" (McConnell, 1994, p. 20).

However, during the "Group Work," it was not always easy to quickly find common agreements. It took time and sometimes we needed to meet face-to-face as well, in order to better discuss the topic. This is one of the main problems, which still needs to be overcome when people work online together. This is one of the reasons why Bonamy (2001) in his research asserted that: "A crucial variable was the relationship between the members of a group an their agreement on the objectives and the task to accomplish, in other words how the group negotiated its project" (Bonamy et. all, 2001, p. 300).

I think that these skills are very important when working collaboratively mostly because it is necessary to take into account the diversity of the experience of each participant. Since I was Italian, it meant that the different nationality might have also brought a different way of thinking and this happens more often in an online setting where there is a high presence of people coming from all over the world. However, McConnell (2000) states that cooperative learning promote positive intergroup relations, such as cross-cultural relations. In my case, this assumption was true because I had the chance to get in touch with different people and we needed to respect our own culture and thoughts when working together. What was more, my colleagues had the patience to comprehend my written English, although it was not my first language. However, if some learners were less willing to collaborate, the cultural differences might become a barrier.

In my case, collaborating through the use of the New Technologies created stronger and more selected friendship than in the other face-to-face Master classes. Even if I did not have the chance to meet my group of peers personally, I felt closer with those of whom I must often exchanged ideas, thoughts and comments, using CMC. Kimball and Rheingold (2000) also state this in their article, "How Online Social Networks Benefit Organizations". In any case, the use of collaboration tools made me feel closer with some colleagues although we were a bit "far from each other." This outcome surprised me because at the beginning I did not trust in the New Technology tools and because of the language and cultural barriers presence. With this collaboration experience I realized that a deeper relationship with individuals is possible when working online together.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, in this course I experienced both the strengths and the weaknesses of collaboration.

In the group I had the opportunity to improve my skills and abilities as a Self-Directed Learner, (Berge & Collins, 1995): the tutor had the role of Facilitator and we had the maximum flexibility and control on our works in receiving and giving feedback and for self-assessment. I do think that this "Common" experience taught me the great value that group collaboration and discussion has in respect to self-grown both as a learner and as an individual. It should be more valued, in my view, in common academic learning settings.

On the other hand, I think that since the first impact with the online technology might enhance shyness, loneliness and lack of human presence, a more effective tool of organization and communication should be utilized in order to sustain the learners' presence on the "screen" and in their collaborative work. Considering my personal case, I might affirm that both the growing interest for the course methodologies and the will to obtain the Master's degree were crucial factors in the success of this experience. If I lacked these two elements, I would certainly have left the class. It is not easy to collaborate as a Self-Directed Learner and it is not easy to feel part of a group when foreign and sitting alone in front of a computer.

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