



Collaborating and interacting: Walking together towards our learning community¹

Colaboración e interacción: juntos en camino hacia nuestra comunidad de aprendizaje

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Abstract

This article presents the findings of a research study which aimed to explore the collaborative practices of a group of intermediate level students and the way in which students' interactions contributed to the initial steps towards the establishment of a learning community. Collaboration in this particular study was seen as the actions students took in order to work together towards a common goal. Data revealed that participants went through a three-stage process that moved from individual perspectives to dialogic exchanges to collective constructions of knowledge that emerged from the community they initiated. As students participated in collaborative tasks, they progressively built closer relationships and their sense of belonging to the group progressively increased.

Keywords: forums, knowledge construction, online collaboration.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta los hallazgos de una investigación cualitativa en la cual se exploraron las prácticas colaborativas de un grupo de estudiantes de nivel intermedio y como estas interacciones contribuyeron al inicio de una comunidad de aprendizaje. El concepto de colaboración representó las acciones tomadas para la realización colectiva de un producto objetivo. Los hallazgos revelaron un proceso de tres etapas en el cual los participantes pasaron de perspectivas individuales a intercambios dialógicos que resultaron en construcciones colectivas de conocimiento. Igualmente, a medida que los estudiantes tomaron parte en actividades colaborativas se establecieron relaciones más cercanas y el sentido de pertenencia al grupo se hizo más evidente en los participantes.

Palabras Clave: colaboración, construcción de conocimiento, foros.

1 This article which derives from my master's thesis presents the findings of a project which aimed to explore the collaborative practices of a group of intermediate level students, and the ways in which students' interactions contributed to the initial steps towards the establishment of a learning community.
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Introduction

It is common to think that in Colombian culture, people interact in groups not so much to contribute to the group but to obtain a benefit. This is something that needs to be changed to fulfill the demands of a developing society in which all members of a community must contribute in order to belong to it.

Collaboration, as understood by Cabero (2003) is “a teaching methodology based on the belief that learning increases when students develop cooperative skills to learn and solve the problems and educational actions they see themselves into” (p. 135). However, this is not a particular characteristic that is part of the Colombian culture and mindset which at times, prioritizes individual interests over collective goals.

At Universidad de La Sabana, the Languages and Cultures Department is one of the faculties which has implemented online sessions that foster collaboration among students to reach a final, common learning goal. Additionally, the platform used allows teachers to post the content of each class for students who are absent and want to catch up. However, because of the lack of collaborative work practices in other subjects, students often find themselves confused and overwhelmed when asked to perform as part of a group for their English class.

The main intention of this study was to explore what students’ online forum entries may reveal about the kinds of interactions that occurred and the degree of involvement and engagement of students with their performance as part of a group.

Literature Review

Bearing in mind the importance collaboration has had recently as a trend that many teachers and institutions have adopted and adapted in order to implement different kinds of practices, valuable insights regarding its nature and relevance will be provided. Finally, some

general remarks on the subject of knowledge construction will be addressed.

Collaboration and Online Collaborative Work

Collaboration happens in different contexts and presents varied forms to those interested in its implementation. In the last years, collaboration has taken place in two main settings: traditional face to face classrooms and online learning environments.

It is important to highlight that these two forms of collaboration share characteristics that allow teachers to use similar strategies when giving collaboration a chance in their daily practices. A basic definition of any form of collaboration could be a process that demands learners to work in the achievement of a shared common goal as part of group. In its varied forms, it allows students to have a socially situated learning experience which can have a more positive and meaningful effect on learners.

For learning to occur, human beings are in need of interaction, information exchange, meaning negotiation, and many other factors that play key roles in the acquisition of any target knowledge (Beatty, 2003; Brookfield, 1987; Dooly, 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 1986). Collaboration is a concept that groups together many of the necessary conditions for meaningful learning to take place. Collaboration not only happens in academic contexts, but also in real life, and involves not only social but also thinking skills (Beatty, 2003).

When implemented in traditional classroom settings, collaboration allows students to assume individual responsibilities and varied roles to contribute to their groups, which make them active agents of their own learning (Webb, 1989). However, when students interact in a face to face environment, there might be some drawbacks to their learning process. Webb and Palincsar (1996) mention that:

Students can be left out of group collaboration, extroverted students may dominate group work at the expense of introverted students, and high-status students tend to be more active, assertive, talkative and influential than low-status individuals. Other students may choose not to participate. They may engage in social loafing, or diffusion of responsibility, which arises when one or more group members sit back and let others do the work. (p.216)

The aspects mentioned above are crucial for a successful experience with collaboration in a traditional classroom setting. It can be frustrating for a student to become part of a group which inhibits him or in which not all the members of the group are committed to the responsibilities assigned and the roles assumed.

Working as part of a group is not an easy task, especially among people whose minds are often focused on individual goals and ambitions. However, in recent times, and especially in academic environments, tasks and assignments demand collaboration at various stages to achieve success. According to Beatty (2003):

Collaboration is manifested in the actions a learner takes when working with others and can be evidenced, for, example, as a willingness to listen to others' ideas, suggestions and opinions so that they can be discussed and integrated into further actions, such as decisions about how to complete a task. (p. 102)

Collaboration places learners in situations in which they are required to autonomously take a position to fulfill a task; the learner selects individual strategies to tackle the task and then negotiates in order to make shared decisions. Also, collaboration entails a series of challenges for those interested in working together towards a shared goal. There are a series of steps to take, and different roles that all members of a community or group shall assume; no matter the context in which collaboration occurs.

When talking about collaboration in an on-line environment, it is necessary to consider a series of requirements for its implementation. First, it becomes crucial to consider the fact that members of an online community do not see each other all the time, and thus, do not have the possibility to have synchronous discussions about the task they are completing. As a result, students who interact online, see the need for using other techniques in order to establish effective and efficient communication amongst the members of the group.

Additionally, members of an online community do not have the possibility to make decisions synchronously, a component that is present whenever collaboration takes place in other environments. "When two or more learners sit at a computer and discuss process and content in the target language, they often engage in scaffolded learning, helping each other improve their language" (Beatty, 2003, p. 99).

Authors such as Wegerif and Dawes (1998) have highlighted eight main challenges to collaborative learning that should be considered for its implementation. These challenges were mainly obtained from a study conducted with primary school participants; however, the authors highlighted that most of the behaviors they found do not change as individuals grow older. Some of these behaviors include limited interaction chances for students who do not have leading skills, unequal opportunities among students depending on their computer skills, inhibited participation when teachers were present, etc. However, when working together, students fulfill their need for human and social contact, and, at the same time, reach shared common goals (Beatty, 2003; Brookfield, 1987; Dooly, 2008; Johnson & Johnson, 1986).

The benefits of collaborative learning environments seem to be more prevalent than the drawbacks. It has been proved that learners who are part of a group and who are in charge of the explanation of specific concepts, collection

of pieces of information to complete shared tasks, etc., are more involved with their learning. Regarding this fact, Dooly (2008) asserts that "... every group member will learn their assigned concept and will be responsible for explaining/teaching this to other members of the group... we usually learn more by teaching than we ever learnt as "learners!" (p. 24).

Learners who are part of a collaborative learning environment benefit from the interactions that emerge while they exchange information with their partners. There are also other roles that students play when making part of a group, and such roles allow them to explore different abilities and to contribute in varied significant ways. The roles identified in the present study included leading roles, mediating roles, and decision making roles among others.

In this same train of thought, Brookfield (1987) claims that "as people strive for clarity in self-understanding, and as they try to change aspects of their lives, the opportunity to discuss these activities is enormously helpful" (p. 10). Thus, collaboration enables the development of the ability to think critically, a skill that can hardly be developed individually.

As human beings, the need for interaction is core to our nature, and information exchange is a process that is part of any kind of contact we establish. As a consequence, we cannot state a position towards an issue if we do not receive a reply to our opinion. Similarly, posing our views can feed those of others, and therefore, encourage them to think differently and explore new options to situations or problems they might face in everyday life.

Critical thinking skills then, become a key aspect for successful collaboration to take place. Students must be aware of how different kinds of interactive exchanges allow them to reach higher levels of comprehension, and therefore, reach higher levels of knowledge construction. In our local context, this issue was addressed by Montenegro's (2012) study of EFL learners'

positionings in higher education contexts.

This study was framed under the Collaborative Learning patterns that immerse students into challenging and questioning tasks. Regarding this matter, she highlights that "student-generated questioning is a key component of rich classroom contexts that challenge learners to interact and collaborate among themselves. It is the process by which a learner reports possible findings and poses questions in regards to a topic" (p. 4).

As students find themselves constantly interacting in the same environment and under similar conditions, they become more aware of how different they are from each other. However, this does not mean that collaboration fosters discrimination. On the contrary, despite the differences students may find among themselves, they may create supporting communities that help each other whenever it is required.

Thus, by interacting with others, students are not only contributing to the achievement of a common goal; but increasing their analytical skills when mediating, sharing opinions, and acknowledging the similarities and differences that emerge during the process. Students' tolerance levels increase by accepting that every human being has different perspectives and that such variety does not hinder but enriches the interaction experience.

Every single member of a community has a different story. Therefore each one brings a different background to all of the activities they get involved with. It is just natural that not everybody assumes and accepts facts the same way. Several reactions toward the same situation can arise in collaborative tasks in which each person obtains benefits, but also contributes to the community.

Social interaction and knowledge construction are two aspects that go hand in hand. Students cannot construct knowledge in isolation, and, as learners become active social members of a community, their opportunities for creating new knowledge increase. All knowledge acquired

by any human being elaborates on previous experiences that result from a person's social interaction.

In regards to the characteristics of the knowledge construction process learners go through when being part of a community, Salmon (2006) highlights specific traits that make part of such process:

- The contribution needs to be acknowledged and the contributor "heard"
- The contributions should be available for others to read as a form of inventory
- Some people may need more time than others to make contributions; others may reach conclusions quickly and may become impatient with those who cannot
- The moderator should comment on the amount of data presented and the quality of the argument presented (modeling ways of exploring and developing arguments) (p.29)

The knowledge construction process also involves teachers. We are in charge of moderating and showing students paths for meaningful interaction to take place. According to Clavijo, Hine, and Quintero (2008):

Students do not need to be encouraged to socialize, but they do need to be encouraged to socialize in ways that allow them to learn from their peers in other places and situations...teachers need to be encouraged to take advantage of the opportunities afforded by a facility such as the forum because forum activities are different from conventional classroom activities, and they have different goals and learning outcomes. (p. 165)

The activities I implemented via forum were intended not only for the instruction of a second language, but also to the development of students' abilities to negotiate meaning, make collective decisions, and evaluate their partners' contributions. This is done with the purpose of

constructing a learning community from which all the participants involved could profit according to their needs and expectations.

Learning communities have become a phenomenon that has called call researchers' attention in the last years. A great deal of research has been devoted to those features that differentiate an online community from a traditional classroom community. Palloff and Pratt (2007) highlight the importance of an effective learning community and mention that "...the key to successful online learning is the formation of an effective learning community as the vehicle through which learning occurs online" (p. 4).

Similarly, they mention the benefits that effective online learning communities have not only on the learners but also on the faculty members involved in this kind of teaching. Students who belong to an effective online learning community have different opportunities than those in a classroom, and teachers in a traditional setting tend to carry out different practices than those who teach online. Among the benefits of an effective learning community, Palloff and Pratt (2007) list the following:

Greater availability and accessibility of information, engagement of different learning styles, and promotion of increased responsibility for teaching and learning. The changes faculty are experiencing include greater accessibility to and availability of information but also encompass the development of new skill sets for teaching and the need to rethink pedagogy, redefine learning objectives, reevaluate assessment, and redefine faculty work roles and culture. (p. 4)

The fact that effective online learning communities are influencing not only learners but also teachers who belong to them is a core aspect to the successful implementation of online learning. Teachers are in need of switching to more innovative practices, more thoughtful

evaluation, and clearer ideas of what an online teacher should do differently in order to construct a successful online learning experience.

To conclude, it is important to highlight that the knowledge construction process from which all the members of a learning community benefit is a mutual process that demands participation from both teachers and students. A successful learning community should evidence critical thinking skills in the participants' contributions. Also, it should be a community in which the knowledge constructed is not a momentary phenomenon but a present element in the real contexts of those who belong to the community.

Research Design

The study described in the present article sought to achieve better comprehension of students' entries in the forums proposed and the kinds of collaborative practices they engaged in. Also, I intended to explore the relationships established by students when performing as part of a group and the way these interactions helped them initiate a learning community.

I chose qualitative action research as my research perspective taking into account that this is an exploratory approach which intends to help the people involved to find out about events going on in their contexts.

As defined by Burns (1999) "the Action Research Approach focuses on concrete and practical issues of immediate concern to particular social groups or communities. It is conducted in naturally occurring settings, primarily using methods common to qualitative research" (p. 7)

Context

The setting of this study is Universidad de La Sabana, a higher education institution located in Chia, Cundinamarca and founded about 30 years ago. More than 30,000 students have graduated

from this institution. It has a Department of Foreign Languages and Cultures which offers a resource center to all of its students called STUDIUM it promotes foreign language (English, French, Mandarin, and Portuguese) autonomous learning through the use of technological resources. One of the most important technological resources used by the department is the institutional platform called Virtual Sabana which uses MOODLE and provides several tools that allow students to work and interact together. This platform is the one used by the department as the academic space in which students carry out their online session every week.

Participants

The age of the students who participated in this study ranges between 16 and 24. Most of them are full-time students and a high percentage of them come from bilingual schools. Others have not had much contact with English, and a very reduced number of students have not had any kind of contact with the English language at all.

For this specific study, students from an intermediate level of English were chosen given the fact that I worked with this level for more than 3 semesters. What is more, as evidenced by their on-line class performance students seemed to have great difficulties when working collaboratively and when performing as part of a group which is one of the most important requirements for the online session programmed every week and which is a mandatory component of the language levels at the institution.

All of the data collection instruments involved students' work and opinions towards the phenomenon studied; therefore, I specifically included a space where they could be sure of the confidentiality of the information given in the consent forms they signed. I also made sure they knew about the purposes of the project. Also, students were informed of the possibility of being part of the project as long as they wanted

or quitting the study in the moment they felt like doing so.

Data Collection Instruments

For this particular study, data was constituted by students' online forum entries in order to analyze the kinds of collaborative practices my students engaged in. Secondly, two semi-structured interviews were conducted. The first interview took place at the beginning of the semester, and the second interview took place right before the end of the intervention. These interviews attempted to explore students' insights on collaboration, and the kinds of bonds they had established as the intervention went on.

The largest amount of the data I collected comes from the thirteen weekly online forums used for the implementation of the tasks proposed. The implementation of the tasks via the forum took thirteen academic weeks. Each

of the forums was carefully downloaded, saved, and analyzed.

In regards to the rigorousness required to analyze this type of data, several authors agree on the sense that forums, blogs, drawings, emoticons and so on provide visual features that no other kind of data can provide.

A second instrument used was semi-structured interviews which were also a good way to capture participants' authentic insights as they allow researchers to change the course of the conversation whenever it is necessary as to enquire more in depth in subjects of interest that emerge from the interaction. I personally developed an interview protocol and then interviewed students; however, these interviews varied from student to student according to the responses received. These interviews were highly informative to the study and allowed me to identify different aspects in each of the conversations held.

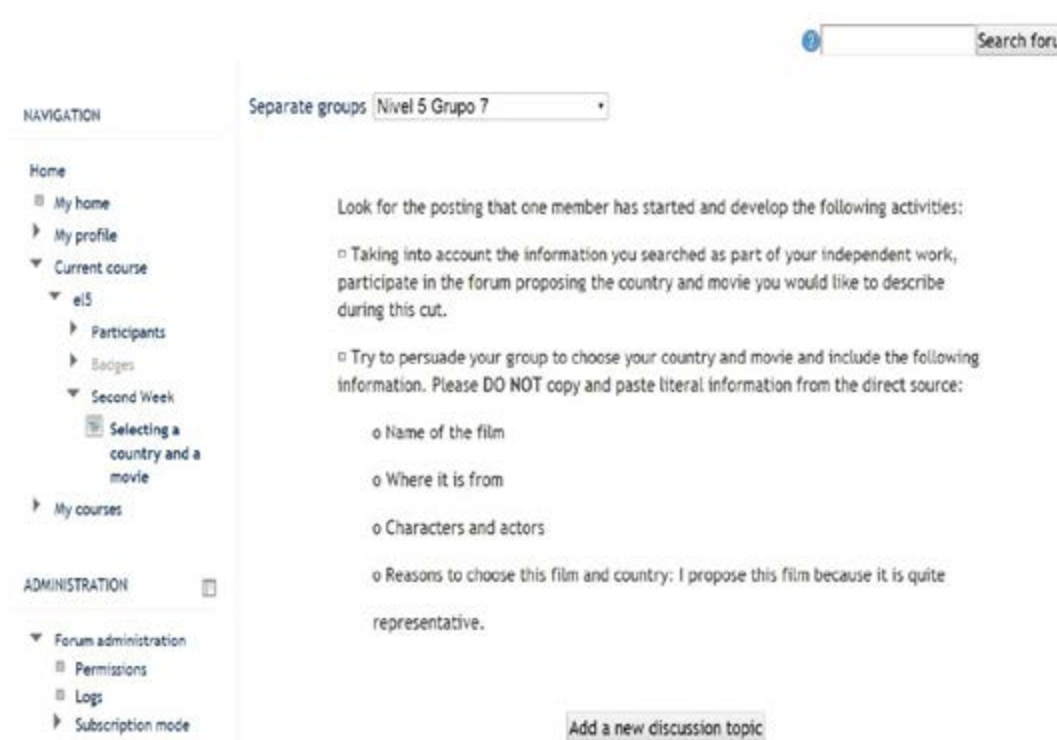


Figure 1. Forum Task Layout Sample.

Data Analysis

Data was collected for a period of thirteen academic weeks and each of the sessions had its corresponding lesson plan. The first week was used to guide students on the use of the MOODLE

platform and for students to upload their profile which would be the one they would use for the rest of the intervention. The other sessions were devoted to the corresponding topics.

Every week, students were assigned different tasks in which they had to interact via the forum

The screenshot shows two forum posts and their replies. The first post is titled 'Re: Aspect of Society' and is from 'PARTICIPANT 0 - anates, 18 septiembre 2012, 9:09'. The text of the post is: 'The aspect that i wanted to propose was Economy. This topic is really interesting because its influence moves all the world: The culture, the society, the environment, etc. This is a great topic, but the Jose proposal is really interesting too, and i think who, with the environmental issues, we could do a great job and a great presentation.' The second post is also titled 'Re: Aspect of Society' and is from 'PARTICIPANT 0 - anates, 18 septiembre 2012, 10:37'. The text of the post is: 'I think the idea of Santiago about the economy, it's a very good idea. But the idea of Jose about the environment it's really Good idea. But i would like to propose the idea of the change on the music in the time, how the future it's the beginning of a lot of new genres in the music.' The replies are from 'Laura Leticia Carreño Bolívar' and include: 'Presenting his proposal to the group', 'Supporting his proposal', 'trying to provide his partners', 'showing his interest towards the proposal made', 'showing his interest towards the proposal made', and 'presenting his own proposal to the group'.

Figure 2. Online Forum transcription: Open Coding Sample.

- Contributing and suggesting the order of ideas for the task (2)
- Individual contributions. Centered on own perspective without any kind of interaction (25)
- Use of imperatives to invite others to examine the contributions given.
- Letting partners know about another member's lack of contribution and engagement.
- Using questioning remarks to invite reflection to take place (1)
- Addressing partner directly to clarify (using questions)
- Reflecting on partner's contribution
- Using questions for clarification
- Clarifying distributions of tasks
- Correcting faulty elements (Sarah)
- Presenting arguments to support his-her point or proposal. (11)
- Acknowledging suggestions without replying
- Using mother tongue to either get close or to maintain distance from her partner.
- Short comment on the length of the task
- Addressing partners individually, asking for more relevant contributions.
- Ignoring partner's suggestion
- Giving up
- Trying to convince partners using authorities in the topic.
- Specifying his role in the group
- Complementing task
- Expressing personal point of view (7)
- Acknowledging her partners' contributions (4)
- Expressing agreement with partner's contribution or proposal (7)
- Inviting partners to identify faulty points in the task.
- Evaluating a contribution or proposal made by a partner (5)
- Expressing indifference towards the decision made (2)
- Using examples to support a partner's point of view
- Elaborating on partner's idea
- Presenting a perspectives for the analysis of the topic (5)
- Providing a specific source of information
- Trying to persuade partners (4)
- Individual but more dialogic contributions. Centered on own perspective. (4)

Figure 3. Focused Coding Sample.

in order to achieve certain goals. In total, I collected thirteen forum transcriptions which corresponded to the number of tasks assigned to students during the intervention.

I also carried out two semi-structured interviews with the whole group of participants.

The first interview took place during the third week of the intervention and the second took place during week fourteen, two weeks before the end of the intervention.

I analyzed my data under the parameters of Grounded Theory which is a method for

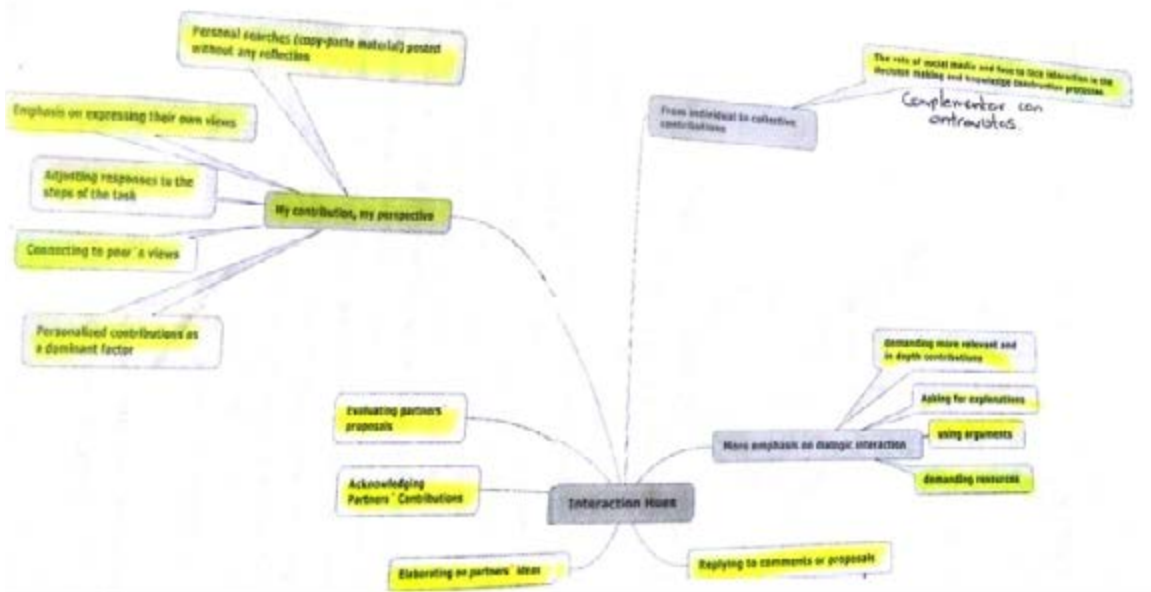


Figure 4. Axial Coding.

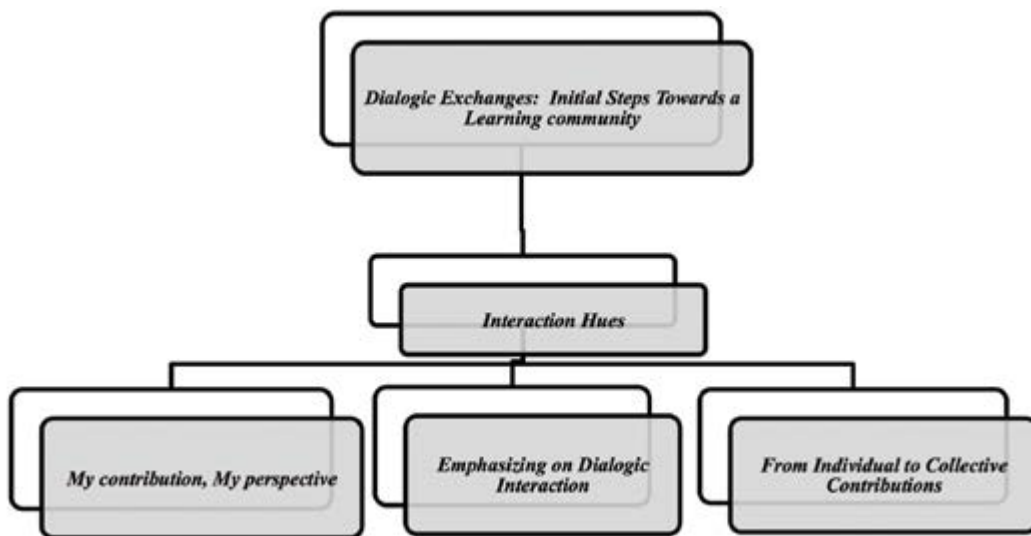


Figure 5. Main findings and examined aspects

qualitative data analysis that builds up from the analysis of information starting with specific, narrow details, which then are grouped to find patterns that characterize the data collected.

Charmaz (2006) states that “Grounded Theory Coding consists of at least two phases: initial and focused coding. During initial coding we study fragments of data- words, lines, segments, and incidents- closely for their analytic import” (p. 42). During the process of collecting and analyzing data, I reached the initial, focused, and axial types of coding.

Findings

Dialogic exchanges: Initial steps towards a learning community

Data revealed that as students’ interaction and exchanges became more fruitful and enriching, their collaborative work became more successful since the goals proposed were achieved more easily and accurately. Additionally, as each group member contributed to the tasks proposed, the final products were more elaborated and students were aware of the importance that listening to others and taking into account what others thought had as crucial components of a collective knowledge construction process.

Time was not wasted on trying to fulfill all of the requirements of the task anymore, but on working hard on their corresponding assignments to then build a well-founded collective product that could be shared by the end of each grading period as a group Glogster™.

As students’ efforts started to progressively focus on the success of their group, they started to develop argumentative skills that allowed them to make more relevant and well-founded contributions that reflected their opinions and feelings towards any of the proposed topics or emergent situations. This argumentation process also helped them build a sense of belonging to the group as some of the opinions provided reflected shared beliefs, likes, and preferences.

Similarly, language started to vary according to the purposes of each post and the degree of closeness they had with each other. Informal expressions and words, humor, and even the usage of nicknames started to appear as the signaling sources of stronger bonds among group members. This reflected the ways in which a collective product was generated based on shared responsibility and commitment synergies.

Interaction Hues

The name *Interaction Hues* referred to the traits of the knowledge construction process that students went through during the thirteen-week intervention. All tasks that were implemented aimed at having students work collaboratively. The name of this includes the word hues to signify students’ attempt to interact and their progress when trying to generate conversations that went beyond individual contributions and which began to acquire a more dialogical character.

Data suggested that students’ interaction went through three stages that were characterized by a transition from learners’ individual perspectives to a state in which students became more aware of their partners’ presence to emphasizing dialogic exchanges.

My Contribution, My Perspective

The initial stage was marked by an emphasis on the individual responses students produced to the tasks proposed in the pedagogical implementation. It was evident that they focused mainly on complying with the requirements of the tasks. This means that students were aware that they had to fulfill a task and consequently searched for information, identified what they considered useful for the task based on their background and preferences, copied fragments of texts mostly from Internet sources, and posted the results of their quest in the forums. The reflection in the entries was limited with few attempts to paraphrase in

order to personalize the content. In addition, interaction was limited to the use of questions, comments, or observations on partners' entries.

It was observed that as the students posted their entries, they began to address particular aspects of their selection and focused on the emotions the films generated in them. The data also showed that they were always thinking about fulfilling the task, which is visible in some of the posts by the end of forum.

By the end of the weekly sessions, tasks were usually completed by adding fragments from each

of the contributions of the members of the group. The leader of each group was usually the one in charge of consolidating the information to be posted in the forum.

Students were posting their perspectives and preferences on the topic for the task, but they did so from their own individual framework. Basically, they included pieces of information they wanted to include in the body of the composition. This specific activity required that students selected a movie and a country in order to build a film review by the end of the term.

Re: Selecting a country and a movie- Group 7
by _____ - domingo, 12 agosto 2012, 8:50

Name of the film: The Chorus

Directed by: Christophe Barratier

Country: France

Characters: Pierre Morhange, Clément Mathieu, mother Violette, Mr. Rachin, the children`s.

I chose this film: It is the story of children who are poor and that their parents left them in a boarding school. This film focuses on the story of a teacher who wants to help these children and make a chorus. In the end, the teacher manages to sing in front of the school, after an event is going to school.

I chose the country because I seem to have a beautiful culture and can work on it.

Show parent | Edit | Split | Delete | Reply

Figure 6. Sample post.

Re: Selecting a country and a movie- Group 6
by _____ - martes, 14 agosto 2012, 11:49

Mary! I think this movie (Pan's Labyrinth) is incredible too. I like soooo much!!

I think we can do a stand more interesting If we choose this movie, because "Life is beautiful" is a classical movie and everybody has watched it, on the other hand, Pan's Labyrinth is a different movie, it can be very attractive by its message and the way it reflects the reality of its time (Spanish Civil War). It can also teach the viewers about the Spain's history. Finally, there are many movies that can show values and a love story but only a few are able to mix a great message and story with a fantastic fictitious scenery.

Please give me your opinion as soon as possible !!

Take care!

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Figure 7. Sample post.

The students made a selection, but no traces of inquiry or invitations to reflect upon the reasons for including or excluding a given movie or country were shown.

Nevertheless, in one group, students attempted to generate reflection about the contents that should have been included in the task. Those attempts were prompted by the leader of the group who used different strategies to invite partners to contribute and reflect upon their entries. Among the strategies, there were questions for clarification and approval. Other

times, the leader used imperatives to distribute responsibilities among the members of the group. Also, she pointed at faulty elements of the task and made suggestions that resulted in reflection, which was evidenced by the fact that the participant who received the comment edited the content previously posted.

The final product of the first phase was a Glogster™ which contained a film review and different resources about the movie and country chosen. This final production was still centered on individual perspectives and personal searches. The



Figure 8. Glogster™ Sample. Target Task first cut. Participants A, B, C, D.

Glogsters™ were assembled by fragments copied from the entries students had posted during the term, which in turn were copied from the Internet sources they had previously consulted.

Emphasizing Dialogic Interaction

The pedagogical intervention included a second task in which students had to select a specific aspect of society and make a comparison between its past and future, for example, families of the past and families of the future. Students started to demonstrate more interactive participation in which the levels of individual predominance decreased.

Although students had their own preferences and background knowledge as key aspects for the selection of topics and for their contributions, they began to reply to partners' comments and proposals. This may indicate that students' awareness regarding their roles as group members was increasing as the intervention progressed. For example, in the entries displayed below, a specific group was attempting to decide on the topic for their second cut task. The week leader started the conversation and the other members of the group started replying. It was interesting to see that all of the posts had elaborated on the previous one, which confirms that by this point of the intervention, the degree of involvement and commitment displayed by students was increasing; therefore, the process started becoming more enriching in terms of knowledge construction and meaning negotiation.

During this phase, the significance of the leader was also evident. This was a student who assumed the organization of the assignments, stimulated participation, formulated questions, and invited partners to contribute to the task. There were some cases in which the leader questioned partners' suggestions. This was done in an implicit way through posing questions, proposing alternatives, or highlighting areas that could be improved.

Although some students addressed their partners by asking questions and used capital letters to emphasize the benefits of the proposals made, they also provided opportunities for partners to express their views and preferences. One aspect that was of particular importance is that the strategies adopted by some leaders prompted an immediate response from their partners, some of them suggested discussing the issues they had during the face to face sessions, to which some leaders replied that such discussion should take place in the forum. This indicates the importance that the students were assigning to the virtual space.

Some posts showed that students clearly understood the guidelines provided for the development of the task. They reminded their partners that decisions should be made only in the forum. From this, it might be concluded that although some of them were not weak leaders, they played a very important role in their group, since they were always monitoring their partners' interventions and avoiding actions that could affect the group's performance. During the pedagogical intervention, groups which included "natural leaders" were outstanding and punctual, a fact that reveals that having a "natural" leader in the group was a determining factor for groups to succeed and advance in the process.

Students also assumed other roles such as the mediator and the problem solver. In some cases when the decision making processes delayed the group in the development of tasks, students opted for a more neutral position in which they did not take sides, or in some cases offered other options for the group to consider in order to make a final decision. However, other group members who were making proposals encouraged those neutral members to either make a proposal or to pick a side in order to make a decision and move on to the next phase of the task.

Regarding other characteristics of the second phase of the process, students became more aware of the importance of reading their

partners' contributions in order to maintain a logical sequence in the forum contributions. Also, by reading the posts of others, students had the chance to decide whether to make a new proposal or to align to a proposal that had already been made by another group member. Whichever position students assumed, either aligning to a previous proposal or making a new one, they always resorted to strong arguments such as information provided by

their partners, articles and videos, and opinions and decisions that were intended as a means to support their choices.

By that point of the intervention, it was possible to distinguish several differences among the groups. Those groups which were more active in participation and that showed more commitment and involvement had more complete results in the final Glogster™ presented at the end of the second cut.



Figure 9. Glogster™ Sample. Target Task second cut. Participants A, B, C, D.

The Glogster™ posted by one of the groups was successful because this group not only followed the parameters of the task, but also added more information regarding their topic. This particular group chose the topic of families for the comparison of its past and future. They included a diagram which explained the similarities and differences of families in different periods, videos and images which illustrated the way families have changed over time, and informative articles (both in English and Spanish) they had read during the cut.

This Glogster™ evidences a more complex cognitive construction taking place in this group. The analysis of the topic reflects a critical

perspective through which students evaluated the similarities and differences of the same topic in different periods, gathered informative articles, and finally included the most relevant information in their final product. This was completed while taking into account not only the parameters given as a guide, but also their own viewpoints to be reflected in the production.

Additionally, students exercised varied use of resources in order to complement group tasks. They looked for several elements that could be of use to the group and personalized their contributions by means of including opinions, videos, articles, and other sources they found thought provoking. This was a naturally occurring



Figure 10. Glogster™ Sample. Target Task second cut. Participants E, F, G, H

phenomenon and was the result of the engagement evidenced by students and of the significance the tasks gradually started to have for them.

In contrast, another group's Glogster™ did not fulfill the task requirements due to the lack of participation and commitment from some of the group members. In this case, students limited their production to the inclusion of a few images related to the topic, but which did not illustrate their comparison between the past and future of fashion as well as expected. In addition, the differences and similarities they included were not very relevant for the audience; what is more, the information layout and the display of the information was not as visually appealing as that of other groups.

It was evidenced that the products obtained by those groups whose interactions had been consistent and enriching fulfilled the task requirements and demonstrated critical and analytical levels of understanding; however, for those groups whose interactions had been limited and scarce, the final result was not very successful. Consequently, it could be argued that interaction and dialogic exchanges were key factors to successful collaborative work.

From individual to collective contributions

In the next phase of the process, the presence of dialogic elements that accompanied the process and that started emerging as students participated week after week was more evident. At that point, students started elaborating on their partners' ideas, not just showing agreement, but also complementing the information posted by others and expanding the topic proposed. Furthermore, students presented different perspectives for the analysis of topics in order to guide the group. By that point, students' posts had become more dialogic and evidenced a deeper level of negotiation and awareness of the presence of others. Students started to acknowledge the presence of partners by using

questions in their posts such as "*What do you think?*" or sentences such as "*I will waiting your answer back!!*"

Students' interventions did not have the same formality they had at the beginning of the intervention. Students started to use elements such as sense of humor in order to call their partners' attention towards the topic being discussed or the task being developed by the group. The language used also changed and phrases such as "*hey guys*" or "*group, I like your topic...*" are an indicator of how students began to feel more comfortable when interacting with their partners.

Regarding this matter, Keller's ARCS model (1987) includes factors such as humor, participation, and self-confidence as key factors of human motivation when interacting with others. It was evidenced that selecting appropriate topics for discussion and evaluating the comments made by others contributed to the development of a sense of collectivism. By that point of the intervention, students' posts were no longer based on individual benefit, but on the benefit of the whole group.

At that point, students were demanding more relevant and fruitful contributions from other members of the group. By week 12, students were showing more critical comments which made the discussions much more rich and interesting. The replies had a much deeper content and helped the group more positively.

Students were also able to provide useful resources that were able to contribute to the group and to the completion of the tasks assigned. Students were more conscious of the need for appropriate and pertinent resources that could help them to complete their tasks appropriately. One of the main intentions of the intervention was to promote the development of students' informational skills and, although students did not make a critical analysis, they were able to evaluate the appropriateness of the proposals, comments, and resources provided by their

partners according to the requirements of the different tasks.

When evaluating contributions, students not only paid attention to the content but also to the language used and thought about the context in which the resources were shown. This led them to conclude that although the opinions posted were good, the resources were not useful due to the language they contained. Students drew relationships between the context (academic) and the resources posted by partners (informal).

Conclusions and Discussion

As discussed previously, the group of participants went through a process focusing less on their individual contributions and more on creating an environment in which dialogic interaction became more evident.

The process itself was characterized by three main stages. In the first stage, students did not interact with others or did not even acknowledge their presence. Their entries featured individual insights about what each one thought and felt. During the second stage, students started to become more aware of the presence of others and began to take into account their partners' views. This awareness served as the basis for them to start elaborating on their partners' contributions, including their comments, opinions, literal information, and resources.

In the final stage, students revealed a more structured knowledge construction process in which meaning negotiation, interaction, and consensus were the main characteristics of the posts they made. Also, the kinds of interaction varied as students started to develop a sense of collectivism and their performance was planned in order to benefit the whole group, not only some of them.

For groups to succeed, learners should feel that they are part of a learning community, and this sense of membership makes students feel more comfortable and at ease, thus

facilitating the acquisition and construction of knowledge. As students progressed in the semester and participated in the forums, they bonded and created different kinds of relationships that shaped their practices during the implementation.

The present study aimed to explore the collaborative practices of an intermediate group of students and the steps followed towards the establishment of a learning community. One of the most interesting points analyzed was the importance of taking into account that successful collaboration does not happen overnight. Many authors such as Wegerif and Dawes (1998) and Dooly (2008) have highlighted that challenges such as teachers and learners' roles, beliefs, and perceptions on collaboration always play key roles when taking part of collaborative projects and interventions.

Collaborative learning is not an easy path to take, but when implemented with discipline and willingness (Beatty, 2003, McConnell, 1994), it can unveil both teachers and students' hidden abilities and build students' confidence as a result of becoming significant group members.

Finally, I would like to highlight that although students' posts were not graded in terms of language and accuracy, it was pleasant to notice the use of target structures and vocabulary was evidenced in their discussions, weekly products, and final Glogster™. As a teacher, one of my main interests when designing the tasks was not only to have them work together, but also have my students learn the language. I always had in mind the fact that students' performance would not only be evaluated in terms of their online participation, but also with tests that evaluated the skills and abilities they were supposed to have by the level they were enrolled in at the time. Therefore, careful planning in terms of the vocabulary and language structures my students needed for each of the tasks became a cornerstone of the pedagogical intervention phase.

Pedagogical Implications

The research conducted has relevant implications for teachers and institutions interested in carrying out online collaborative work. Before implementing collaborative work, it is important to provide teachers with training in order to avoid inconveniences. Teachers have a fundamental role when students are collaborating. They need to be skillful moderators that not only provide parameters, but also guide students' interventions in terms of argumentation and appropriateness. Also, teachers must become aware of the need for constant follow-up in order to prevent students from deviating from the learning objectives or from making mistakes. For example, if a teacher wants students to use valid information, he or she must guide students in terms of how to weigh the sources they consult and the information they find. This implies a sense of teachers' presence in the platform because if a teacher is absent from students' conversations, they are very likely to have different results from the ones expected.

A second important implication from the study is the need to guarantee that students will count on an audience. Students who participate in collaborative activities via forums need to be heard, acknowledged, and recognized. Acknowledging contributions helps to maintain high levels of motivation that prompt students to participate and interact with one another. This implies that students need to become aware of the importance of listening carefully to their partners' ideas and consequently responding to their comments.

Instructors must design activities to foster mutual communication so that students pay attention to the content of others' speech. One plausible way for teachers to guide students to listen and respond to their partners' comments is by asking questions and re-directing comments about the content of the interventions.

For dialogic interaction to take place, teachers must guide students to be good listeners and must orient the discussion in such a way that students get involved with one another. Asking questions such as what their opinion is about their peers' ideas, if their perspectives differ, the reasons for such a difference, and if there are convergent points among them are just some strategies to promote meaningful interaction. Posing questions that lead students to reflect upon their partners' views helps them to gradually develop critical thinking skills and to become more analytical and rational.

Argumentation via forum should be based on the presentation of valid and solid arguments, useful and pertinent resources, use of knowledgeable sources of information, and most importantly, on being aware of others to maintain fruitful discussions that can profit all group members.

In order to gradually develop students' argumentation skills, teachers could resort to the analysis of students' discussions and interactions. Such analysis enables teachers to know their students' perspectives, the ways they express themselves, and how relevant their comments are regarding the type of discussion and the topic of interest. It also serves to guide students to present reasons, details, causes, effects, and perspectives regarding a topic. If teachers stimulate these aspects, students will gradually develop their critical and analytical skills, which results in more enriching discussions.

Informational literacy is also an important aspect to stimulate collaboration among members in a forum. Students should reflect upon the quality of the information they consume. This is also a cornerstone for the development of autonomous learners who can evaluate and select appropriate and pertinent information and resources for any situation in life. Nowadays, language teachers can take advantage of the amount of information students access on a daily

basis. However, the need for selectivity should be refined so that students make appropriate choices about the resources they use for their tasks.

Teachers should emphasize the importance of consulting reliable sources that provide valuable and trustworthy information. Students' decision making process about the usefulness of material should not be based on the immediacy of the information, but on the reliability of the exposed concepts. As informational literacy is developed, students will make more informed evaluations of the comments and sources presented by their partners. As students have gone through a careful selection process themselves in order to contribute with valuable insights, they can go through the same process with others.

Apart from this, it is important for teachers to take into account the importance of designing tasks that foster collaboration between students and promote dialogic interaction that results in a collective construction of knowledge. It is also imperative to allot enough time for activities to be fully explored and developed by students. In order to comply with a curriculum, teachers should plan a wide set of activities to obtain products from students' work and, therefore, have sources to obtain grades. However, collaboration and knowledge construction are cognitive processes in which students take a long time to perform as expected.

It is necessary for students to be provided with enough time as to adapt themselves to the mechanics of online forums, and most importantly, to the mechanics of collaborative tasks that demand involvement and commitment from them.

Although most students nowadays are digital natives, institutions need to be aware that students should also be properly trained in the use of the technological tools required for the implementation of activities. Students need to feel comfortable and at ease, so they are not discouraged when trying to participate in the tasks.

In sum, the ideas presented here intend to make some suggestions and reflections for teachers who want to take advantage of collaborative activities mediated by technology in order to support language learning.

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