

Online Collaborative Project—Report

by Paula Murarescu

Participating in a problem oriented group project, where the members are autonomous in defining and negotiating challenges without the interference of a supervisor, offered me valuable insights into the mechanisms of collaborative work. It also helped me understand that when such an experience is contained within the online environment, it develops an interesting dimension that brings forth complex notions of quality of learning, individual agency and “digital wisdom” (Perensky 2011: 15-29).

This report offers a reflection on my experience as an adult learner part of an online collaborative group and focuses on peer interaction, the use of digital tools to facilitate collaborative learning and the implications of implementing such an approach to teaching, learning and assessment.

Digital Collaboration

Collaborative learning engages both social constructivism and experiential learning (Laurillard 2012), but perhaps in an online environment the extent of this learning for each member and its quality and depth is more difficult to quantify.

As a team, it could be said that we engaged in learning through discussion especially in the forming, storming and norming stages (Jaques 2000: 33) of our group development as we shared individual perspective of what our resource should be, and ultimately agreed on a direction. As we progressed to the performing stage, I found that we engaged in a surface level of experiential learning through practice, as we collated separate answers to individual tasks without real integration via reflection and feedback. This last point emphasizes the key finding of my report—that cognitive development within an online collaborative environment is arbitrary unless students’ intrinsic motivation, desire to participate and curiosity to explore is scaffolded.

My participation involved the assimilation of everyone’s ideas into a complete proposal that would align to University aims, as well as the development and design of the resource. The task repartition was done in a relaxed manner under a “democratic leadership” (Jaques 2000: 31), and on the basis of individual strengths in relation to the task—as a graphic designer I “fell” into my role as creative director. While such an approach made for an easy-going atmosphere punctuated by a lot of positive reinforcement from the project manager, it did mean that there were members whose skills didn’t have such a clear-cut translation within the task and who became “free-riders” (Kreijns, Kirschner and Jochems 2003) without tasks assigned for the most part of the collaborative process. This lack of clear accountability may have also set a tone of superficial membership with almost non-existent challenging and negotiation of ideas, let alone points of differentiation that might have pushed our project further. This has indeed made for a very smooth process—the lack of arguments and debates

meant I could “get on” with implementing all of my proposed ideas, but may have cut us all from the real learning that comes with richness of opinions.

Ultimately, I feel we produced a good group output, but with very little group interaction. The real success of a collaborative team lies in the implementation of a reiterative cycle around challenging of ideas, analysis and application (Laurillard 2012), which I believe we didn’t do enough of. One could argue that this is not specific to online collaborations, but I can’t help but wonder whether the absence of eye contact and body language cues reinforced the fragmentation within the team. In the light of our interactions being purely text-based within Skype and Joiner et al.’s (2002) findings whereby eye contact via online platforms involving negotiation “encourages interaction” and fosters fluid role-division, our experience signposts the importance of video conferencing within the online team environment.

Digital Literacy

One of the pre-requisites of collaboration is communication and the digital dimension entails developing and maintaining a constant social presence. The use of Skype allowed us to engage in a predominantly asynchronous conversation. This allowed for extra time to articulate my ideas with clarity, a precision synchronous chatting or face-to-face interactions don’t always allow for. I could also stay connected even when I was away given the “mobile and adaptive” (de Freitas and Conole 2010: 15-30) nature of technology. I did find however that working in a virtual space made it also incredibly easy to “withdraw” or be “passively interactive” (Clark et al. 2009) as we experienced unresponsiveness on the part of some members.

I supplemented our interactions with Google Docs which could be used both as a collaborative document and conversation. It wasn’t popularly accepted however, and whilst I attribute this to the overall patchy engagement, I do believe it points to an important digital literacy challenge. There is an initial resistance towards new and unfamiliar processes that requires conscious overcoming if digital fluency is to be developed. The aversion I experienced towards a new technology—a file exchange tool suggested by the project leader, emphasized this further for me and shed light on the awareness of self and openness one needs to develop to enable digital skill development. This brings forth concepts of risk-taking, openness to change and resilience to surpass initial lack of confidence in competence that need to be acknowledged (Howard and Mozejko 2015).

How efficient we perceive the use of technology, also affects the rate with which digital tools are appropriated—for instance, I experienced frustration with our main way of communication via Skype as I realised the version we were using had no archiving possibilities as it consistently erased previous conversations. This points to the importance of managing expectations and the consideration that must be given to finding the right tools for the task before the start of the project, which incidentally we never collectively analysed.

Not all digital tools offer the same experience, nor bear the same connotations. For example, we could have used Facebook as perhaps a more reliable and familiar tool, but we all intuitively

dismissed the option because of the informal qualities we perceived it to have. Which leads to another dimension of the digital world—boundaries. Although we never discussed it, it is clear that we all wanted to keep our interactions business facing, we didn't want the project to overflow into our personal or work lives. The asynchronous pattern of communication via a platform specifically designed for synchronous chats (Skype) was a way of us implementing these invisible boundaries. This is an important point to consider as we go on implementing “ubiquitous and networked” (de Freitas and Conole 2010: 15–30) and potentially intrusive technologies within the classroom.

Implications for Teaching, Learning and Assessment

My experience and the observations above hint at a few of the implications of designing an online learning experience for students. I have expanded below on these key points, whilst considering the potential difference in attitudes towards digital tools digital natives (Perensky 2011: 15–29) might display.

In my opinion, scaffolding students' experience and providing them with the right tools and processes to develop productive self-efficacy within an online collaborative environment is crucial. The job of the teacher as facilitator is to maximize the opportunities and minimize the pitfall associated with integrating digital technologies in the learning space. To make learning as part of a group happen, the teacher must scaffold the students “intellectual energy” (Laurillard 2012: 144) and develop methods to elicit productive student interaction.

Productive Agency

Organizational structures and consistent productivity are crucial in any collaborative environment, and perhaps even more important in a purely online space, where the virtual dispersion of team members without much prior history can reinforce an individualistic and isolated approach. “Students need to trust each other (...) before they will engage willfully in collaboration and recognize the collaboration as a valuable experience” (Rourke 2000 cited in Kreijns, Kirschner and Jochems 2003: 341). It is therefore important that strategies are employed to foster the development of students' “productive agency” (Schwarz 1998) as the motivation to create and share. Deeper engagement can be designed with activities such as group-bonding workshops, rotation of roles within the team and the integration of mandatory video-conferencing points and formative deadlines within the module.

Resistance towards new technologies

Digital natives are also prone to resisting new technologies and they too tend to revert to more familiar social media platforms as a principal method of communication. Contrasting with my own approach but in line with my observations in class, it seems that students prefer synchronous and urgent conversations and have less defined work/personal boundaries in rapport with their group peers. As a result, they tend to engage in ‘around the task networking and technology use’ (Benfield and de Laat 2010: 196). This spreading out of communication across more informal technologies

could be detrimental to the progress of the group in that it is unstructured and unfocused. This tendency needs to be controlled, ground rules must be set and technologies for enabling collaboration need to be carefully curated and supervised to ensure that their affordances truly facilitate task learning outcomes (Ingram, Hathorn and Evans 2000).

Implications to Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Fair assessment of online collaborative work hinges on the implementation of appropriate methods of archiving and documenting group and individual contribution. Beyond choosing the right tools, this can be put in place by asking students to “leave traces” by using tag words or openers to signpost their comments online (Laurillard 2012) and blogging for weekly reflection on progress.

To conclude, based on own experience online collaborative environments propose a very complex set of issues for both the learner and educator. Scaffolding the student’s experience is crucial, but it does not mean micro-managing their experience nor giving them prescriptive rules. It entails the provision of a sturdy foundation that would enable “the agents to self-improve and organize their collaborations” (Schwartz 1998). From a learner’s perspective, this kind of learning experience is designed to test their ability to overcome pre-conceptions, maintain a productive social presence and engage in mutual social and intellectual support. Above all, the online environment and its complexity needs to be tackled judiciously and with an open mind by both parties.

Please see below for resource rationale and list of references.

Resource Rationale

“A student-centred approach recognises the diversity of our student population. We have a responsibility to them to provide an excellent student learning experience and consistent support for their studies.” (Gearing 2015: 15)

COVONESTOP (paulamurarescu.coventry.domains) is the result of a collaborative online project Ambi, Nirooja, Farish, Ernesto and I developed over a 10 week period. The resource is a concatenation of individual ideas, carefully framed within the Coventry University context and constructed to serve what we collectively observed to be a real student demand. COVONESTOP is a directory that aims to scaffold level 1 students’ transition from college to higher education. It offers straight-forward answers to questions, we as personal tutors have deemed to be most pressing amongst the first-year student population. In alignment with the University’s priority as stated in the Education Strategy (Gearing 2015) to support all students, our proposal would also address the key issue of retention as it equips all students with the necessary tools to cope and prosper within the academic environment and beyond.

Content-wise, the platform is not a novel proposal as it is built on existing resources published across University websites and intra-net. Our platform does however propose a better, more accessible and user-friendly way of disseminating this knowledge base to students via the Internet. We found that efficiently catering for student needs and appealing to these “digital natives [who] are used to receiving information really fast” (Perensky 2001: 2) requires a change in presentation, a clear and consistent tone-of-voice and a better curation and editing of content. Whilst the statement above is perhaps an oversimplification of a demographic, we all agreed that the support in basic information offered to first year students on matters of attendance, accommodation, assessment and well-being, while present, was too scattered across websites and therefore hard to retrieve and that a dedicated, well structured environment would be beneficial.

Being an online platform we deemed it was important to consider concepts of media literacy in the development and construction of the site. Understanding that the medium is part of the message, we ensured that multimodal elements were used with purpose to give a “narrative account” and shape student acquisition and engagement (Laurillard 2012: 130). In an attempt to work with student’s preconceptions and prior expectations, I proposed for an informal tone-of-voice as supported by use of language, illustration and animation. I was interested in engaging with University’s initiative to develop further digital literacy for staff and as a result agreed with the team that using DOOO and Wordpress as our platform of choice would allow for a more accessible and targeted design.

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