Fostering Interaction and Social Presence through eCollaboration

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ABSTRACT

eCollaboration is an instructional strategy used in online courses in which two or more students work collaboratively at a distance to achieve a pre-determined instructional outcome. In order to work together at a distance, social, cognitive, and teacher presence are required. In this chapter, the authors focus on how social presence informs eCollaboration in the fundamental learning concepts of the strategy, the learning frameworks that support collaborative learning, and for building and supporting learning experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Vygotsky (1981) put forth that social environments influence the learning process and claimed learning is initially “a social function” (p. 162) indicating that learning takes place through the interactions students have with their peers, teachers, and other experts. Vygotsky’s beliefs have been enacted in the 21st century where learning happens anywhere and anytime in collaboration with others both formally and informally through technology. For example, when we need to figure out why the cake we made did not rise, we may post a query to Facebook™; or when we want to know the best way to ask for a raise, we may send out a poll through LinkedIn™. If we want to share moment-by-moment ideas about what someone says in a workshop or at a conference, we may post this to Twitter™. Such strategies can result in discourse, confirmations, and revelations about previously unconsidered ways of thinking and knowing. Learning is now participative, collaborative, and it occurs in real time. The informal learning strategies we use in our work and personal

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lives have further transferred to educational learning; boundaries between our personal, social, and professional lives have blurred.

In higher education, online education – where a student’s learning occurs 100% in an online environment through coursework – has shifted from an isolated experience with limited interaction (Maeroff, 2004) to a rich and varied interactive venture in which learners can interact with everybody (Shirkey, 2008). Social media has increasingly contributed to everyday learning. This happens both within a course experience and with peers outside of academia (Chatti, Jarke, & Frosch-Wilke, 2007) through strategies such as Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Cloud-based systems are freely available and offer seemingly endless opportunity for learner engagement with content, the instructor, and peers (Moore, 1993). However, loosely connected experiences that often comprise an online course may not guarantee learning or learner engagement. Attrition rates have consistently remained higher in online than classroom-based courses (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007). The reasons students drop out of an online course are varied; but evidence indicates students may not be prepared or personally equipped to succeed in an online course (lack of technology skills, persistence, organizational abilities); the institution may not provide sufficient supports (orientations, technical help, advising); and the course design itself may be lacking (disorganized, unconnected activities/assignments/assessments) (Holder, 2007; Park & Choi, 2009; Street, 2010; Tyler-Smith, 2006). A well-organized course offered with sufficient student supports will diminish the impact of some of these factors, but most important is the acknowledgement that an online instructor and participating students must assume unique roles. Morris and Finnegan (2008-2009) found that online instructors enact pedagogical, managerial, technical, and social roles. Further, they noted, online instructors work behind the scenes as course architect, orchestrating the experience of the course while providing the connecting social presence for students. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) define social presence as the “degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p. 65). According to Anderson and his colleagues (2001), raising social presence in online environments can create a warm, collegial, and approachable climate for learners to feel more at ease around the instructor and the other participants. It also supports cognitive and affective learning by making group interactions appealing and engaging.

Building on the native experiences of 21st century adult learners adept at interacting with each other at a moment’s notice, and taking advantage of the ease of personal online presence, the authors provide a foundation of existing theory and design frameworks that inform and guide the organization of eCollaboration to enhance course interaction and enrich social presence. Learning collaboratively through discussion, group projects, and feedback exchange has been widely adopted in face-to-face learning settings to enhance interactions between learners and the instructor. This instructional strategy is highly anticipated to improve social presence in online learning settings, ultimately maximizing learning experience. For the authors, eCollaboration is defined as an instructional strategy used in online courses where two or more students work collaboratively at a distance to achieve a pre-determined instructional outcome. Collaboration and cooperation are often used interchangeably yet are distinct processes as noted later in the chapter.

In this chapter the authors provide background information about the fundamental learning concepts associated with eCollaboration, share learning frameworks that support collaborative learning, provide examples of applications, and make recommendations for building and supporting learning experiences.