Collaborating Online: A Logic Model of Online Collaborative Group Work for Adult Learners

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ABSTRACT

The paper introduces a logic model of online collaborative group work for adult learners. This logic model was developed through a literature review in the context of a multi-year educational design research study aimed at optimizing the online group work experience of adult learners. The model is intended to guide online instructors at post-secondary levels who aspire to develop and teach online courses using collaborative group work and authentic complex learning tasks as primary pedagogies. The paper describes each component of the model such as the goals of collaborative group work, attributes of different groups, and various factors influencing effective group work.

Keywords: Adult Learners, Authentic Learning Tasks, Collaborative Group Work, Logic Model, Online Learning

INTRODUCTION

Investigating online learning environments in relation to collaborative learning is important. First, online learning in higher education has increased rapidly due to its potential to fulfill the educational needs of adults seeking life-long learning by increasing access to professional development opportunities (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Traditional as well as commercial institutions of higher education strive to increase student enrollment by offering online courses and degree programs. Over the last few years, the public at large has become increasingly aware of online learning because of the hype around Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), but strong evidence supporting the quality of MOOCs and other types of online programs remains elusive (Jung & Latchem, 2011; Margaryan, Bianco, & Littlejohn, 2015). The best that can be said is that many online courses in higher education have no better or worse outcomes that their classroom counterparts, but this begs the question of whether just as
good is good enough (Larreamendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006; Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, & Lui, 2006).

Second, although collaborative learning holds much promise for enhancing the quality of current online pedagogy, a careful review of the literature reveals the challenges and resistance experienced by students. Based on a widely held, although not universally accepted, theoretical paradigm that defines learning/knowledge as the outcome of social construction processes shared among participants in learning environments (Lave & Wenger, 1991), collaborative learning has been acknowledged as a powerful strategy (Bruffee, 1999; McConnell, 2006). Reported benefits of online collaborative learning include augmenting interactivity among participants in online environments (Woo & Reeves, 2008), helping learners become more engaged (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009), and providing opportunities to collaborate on complex, ill-structured authentic tasks (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2010).

Third, today’s online environments offer technological affordances with the potential to more effectively support collaborative learning (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). In particular, recent advances in digital technologies can enable active online dialogue and collaboration. The use of Web 2.0 and mobile technologies make possible student collaboration within a more participatory culture (Herrington, et al., 2010) and support new collaborative learning activities that enhance “knowledge creation and sharing” (Dede, 2009, p. 260). Consequently, these innovative tools are more than communication mechanisms enabling interaction among online participants similar to the manner in which it occurs in face-to-face environments. Instead, they are cognitive tools (Kim & Reeves, 2007) with which learners can work collaboratively by sharing knowledge through critical discussions, building interdependence, reflecting on their own and their groups’ learning processes, producing group outcomes, and utilizing multiple resources to accomplish authentic tasks.

Among collaborative learning strategies, collaborative group work is distinctive and is widely used in adult education. Collaborative groups are small, interdependent, and heterogeneous groups designed to explore and solve ill-structured problems together through shared authority and group consensus (Smith, 2005). Use of collaborative group work can help adult learners in many areas including mastery and retention of material, quality of reasoning strategies, process gains, and learning transfer (McConnell, 2006). For adult learners, group work is a fundamental collaborative learning approach that ideally enables learners to not only discuss concepts and processes but also enact these ideas to produce real life outcomes.

**Authentic Learning Tasks and Online Collaborative Group Work**

In any learning environment, learning tasks or activities are an essential part of the learning experience. In online learning environments in which adult learners work collaboratively in groups, the nature of tasks determines the quality of collaboration because task interest influences students’ regulation of motivation (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002; Xu & Du, 2013). For most adults, the actual or perceived relevance of a learning task is even more critical when the paramount goal for their learning is improving their real-life problem-solving abilities and/or job specific skills. Thus, authentic tasks that can increase extrinsic motivation are essential for adult learners to persist in online learning (Herrington et al, 2010). Previous research has shown that authentic tasks have the capability to motivate students to become more active, interactive, and reflective in their learning process, eventually helping them gain a deeper understanding of a subject and experience more satisfactory learning (Woo & Reeves, 2008). Due to the nature and scope of the tasks, collaborative group work is a common and necessary pedagogical approach for students to practice authentic tasks (Jonassen, Lee, Yang & Laffey, 2005). The design and use of authentic tasks embedded in a pedagogical framework that motivates students and encourages active learning such as case, project, or problem-based learning (Jonassen, 2002) can guide the design
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