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The Role of Collaboration in the Design and Production of On-line English Language Learning Materials

Phillip Towndrow and Jaya Kannan

Introduction

The growing popularity of on-line learning environments is transforming methods and approaches in language learning. For instance, with the use of digital technology, it is no longer necessary for teachers to work alone in the design and production of their instructional materials. When teachers work in isolation, they often need to spend a lot of effort in producing material that may only have a limited use. This practice can be tiresome and in extreme cases lead to negative outcomes for both teachers and learners.

This paper illustrates how teachers can collaborate in the electronic realm and explains why digital-age publications benefit from the adoption of production strategies that add value to on-line teaching and learning processes. By reflecting on our experiences of collaborating at a distance in an English on-line reading comprehension project, we identify a set of strategies for language teachers to employ when designing their own on-line materials that promote collaboration.

The Nature of Collaboration

One way of understanding the nature of collaboration is to compare it with a related term, *teamwork*. Teamwork is commonly defined as the ability a group of people has, to work well together (Carmel, 1999). Collaboration, on the other hand, refers to the act of people working together to produce a piece of work and this suggests that collaboration is a constituent of teamwork. Of course, when team members simply co-exist and work to pre-set objectives, experience shows that little or no growth is expected or desired of such groupings and they cannot lay claim to possessing the ability of working well together. As Inkpen (2000) has noted, working well together necessarily involves sharing and learning towards the progressive achievement of common objectives.

However, it is also important to note that collaboration is not simply a matter of sharing expertise. Rather, it is about individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that they could not have possessed on their own (Schrage 1995). Under these circumstances, collaboration is achieved through the extension of human capacity to create a value that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.

The point that collaboration could extend an individual's capability was realized by the first named author as he reflected on his experiences of designing and producing a web-site (<http://philliptowndrow.com>) dedicated to mixed-ability learners of English as a second or foreign language interested in improving their reading comprehension skills. Despite some initial satisfaction in the popularity of the site, the author felt that he was being unduly restricted by his practice of working alone. In particular, he perceived the needs to (1) more closely align the content of the site to the interests of its visitors and (2) find a way of engaging participation in certain activities through a free written feedback feature. Overall, there was a desire to explore ways in which to establish and maintain viable working relationships on-line using computer-based technology as a facilitative tool.

Electronic Collaboration and Language Teaching

To meet the first author's objectives, a former colleague, now living in the United States, was invited to participate in the design and production of materials for the reading comprehension site. The ensuing collaboration resulted in an immediate elevation in the value of the learning opportunities offered on-line. Overall, it was felt that if learners were to be involved in the design and direction of the on-line materials, then this would be best achieved in a learning environment that favoured the sharing of experiences and information.

The notion that collaboration is beneficial in the design of on-line teaching and learning activities is supported by the theory of social constructivism. In contrast to the belief that knowledge must conform to an absolute external reality, social constructivism foregrounds human relationships and maintains that dialogue facilitates the negotiation of knowledge between individuals. Thus, learning under this model requires active involvement in knowledge construction and students are thought to best develop their evolving knowledge bases through interactions with others (Roehler & Cantlon, 1997).

It can be argued that the principles of social constructivism are relevant to teaching materials designers who wish to add value to teaching and learning processes through the exploitation of digital technologies. This is not to say that value cannot be added to on-line learning experiences through other means, but that greater potential for promoting on-line collaboration can best be derived from moving down a certain kind of materials design and production path.

It would be unwise to suggest that there is a single best way to foster collaborative interactions on-line. However, it seems unlikely that collaboration can be fully

fostered in a learning environment that is closed and inflexible. As Ekhaml (1999) states, on-line course designers and instructors “should not be inhibited in experimenting, exploring, practicing and applying collaborative and interactive techniques to achieve ... necessary learners’ outcomes.” As on-line materials designers, we endorse this view and would add that great courage is required to move down the experimental path required by open and flexible learning designs. Our experiences are positive and support the view that electronic-collaboration facilitates electronic-design. The following section sets out our collaborative process in stages, which we believe can be applied to on-line areas beyond language teaching.

Collaboration in Action

This section describes the steps involved in creating Lesson 17 of the reading comprehension web-site (http://philliptowndrow/lesson_17.htm). The collaborative process took on a natural flow of back and forth e-mail discussion. This was achieved by having:

- A clear understanding of the objectives of the web-site,
- A perfect understanding of job descriptions which were negotiated in advance of any work being done, and,
- The adoption of a mostly linear approach in the discussion-process leading to decision making by consensus.

The following five steps exemplify the use of electronic-strategies in the design and production of the jointly produced on-line learning materials.

Step 1: Materials Sourcing

- We searched resources for an appropriate text, keeping in mind the need to abide by copyright laws.
- After a short while we discovered the *Voice Of America Special English* (VOA-SE) texts on the web, and got permission to use them on the site.

This discovery was made by collaborator A who communicated this information to collaborator B (henceforth known as **A** and **B**, respectively).

Step 2: Materials Selection

As **B** had more time at this stage, she offered to select a text.

With a wide variety of VOA-SE texts to choose from, selecting a text for this lesson was determined by the following criteria:

- Working within the objectives of the web-site,
- Assumed suitability of topic, length and interest level for our readers, and,
- Exploitability for on-line activities.

It must be noted that the above-mentioned criteria were not explicitly discussed but rather taken as *given*. This kind of understanding, we feel, is a natural concomitant to working closely together and building trust, over a period of time. Familiarity with the course objectives and experience with developing lessons for the Internet, may have also contributed to the effectiveness in the collaboration at this stage.

Step 3: Preliminary Discussions

We then exchanged preliminary notes via e-mail. This involved a discussion of the following areas:

- An explanation concerning the selection of the text,
- Choice of a theme for the lesson based on the text and the activities envisaged,
- Research for resources: Javascripts and templates, and,
- Suggestions of types of on-line activities to be used.

An important element of the collaborative process at this stage involved justifying or convincing each other of the rationale for the proposed on-line activities. For example, we eventually saw eye to eye on the point that using open-ended questions in the *advanced* category of our activities would provide readers with the right opportunity to think about and voice opinions.

Step 4: Distribution of Work

We agreed on the distribution of work, using brief e-mail communication. It was understood that:

- **A** would work on designing the on-line activities based on two levels of difficulty: intermediate and advanced, and,
- **B** would work on the introductory section of the pages and the timed-reading activity.

For us, this stage has evolved into a routine cyclical pattern of suggestion-feedback-decision which is sometimes more complex than others. While a conscious effort was made to understand who worked on which parts, the contributions did not rest on merely sharing work, but on the higher level of peer learning. As always, there was no single correct path to follow, but being open to options proved to be a great strength at this stage of the collaboration.

Step 5: Instructional Design

The instructional design of on-line activities assumed the technical programming knowledge of each partner, availability of software resources, the need to create new lessons that were consistent with the current template and scope for flexibility in the web lessons. The steps in the development of the on-line lesson included:

- Designing questions for the on-line medium – open-ended for advanced, multiple-choice for intermediate,
- Creation of HTML pages – e.g., text for introduction, converting the questions to on-line quizzes, creating hyperlinks within the page and between pages etc.,
- Customizing templates,
- Seeking permission and acknowledging resources,
- Hosting the lesson on the web, and,
- Reviewing pages, links and making appropriate changes to arrive at the final version.

As a result of our collaborative venture, we feel that we not only worked as a team but also exploited our individual strengths. Here, for example, are a number of the learning opportunities that arose:

1. The electronic-collaboration took on a *visible* aspect when our established face-to-face partnership was transferred on-line. Our relationship was extended through the use of technology that allowed us to transcend the constraints of time and space across a large geographical distance. Through our use of electronic mail we were able to communicate, exchange documents and edit files easily.
2. We were able to involve *invisible* collaborators in our work. These were people whom we had never met in person but they became valuable resources when we sourced for materials and information on the Internet.
3. The flexibility of working with digital media allowed us to write and preliminarily test materials in ways that were distinct from traditional print-based publication practices. Working with *digital-sketches*, or working drafts of learning materials in production, eliminated the constraints of publishing deadlines and the need to produce a final product.
4. Given that on-line media are constantly modifiable, potential was created for our learners to contribute to the materials production. This was done by allowing space for a consensus to be reached between them and us on the direction and content of on-line feedback exchanges.

Problems, Challenges and Concerns Affecting Electronic-Collaboration

The previous section describes a smooth working process that was facilitated by the use of a number of electronic-collaboration strategies. However, it is important

to balance this description with a consideration of the problems, challenges and concerns that can impact on the efficiency and eventual effectiveness of the work of electronic-collaborators. Three broad areas for consideration are: (1) time and distance, (2) exploiting learning opportunities and (3) materials modification.

The notion of distance impeding effective electronic-collaboration cannot be ignored. Take, for example, the issue of building a trusting relationship. As in any form of collaboration, it has been found that "elements of a community emerged" when it was recognized that the collaborator "was not a threat but a valuable partner" (Smith, 2000). Nonetheless, developing this kind of trust seems to be all the more difficult in the on-line environment when collaborators are geographically dispersed and their primary mode of communication is not in real-time. Based on our experiences, we support the view that it is important to trust the writer's intentions in e-mail messages and not to read other ideas or hidden meanings into them. For some cultures sustaining, let alone building, trusting relationships in a detached, electronic environment is unimaginable unless solid personal relationships have been formed earlier (Carmel, 1999).

Three challenges seem particularly relevant to exploiting on-line learning opportunities. The first concerns previous knowledge and learning experiences and the willingness to *unlearn* what might work against the creation of a collaborative learning environment (Inman & Sewell, 2000). The second relates to the way teachers, in particular, manage their use of digital resources. For example, whilst subscribing to and participating in on-line discussions may be helpful, there is a risk that they can also act as a distraction. The challenge, then, is to create and maintain a forceful sense of purpose when going on-line to offer or receive comment. The third challenge surrounds students and their behaviour in taking up the opportunities to use on-line materials. For instance, the web, in general, and the reading comprehension web-site, in particular present unprecedented opportunities for collaboration to take place. Many students from around the world have submitted their comments to us and these have helped us to fine-tune the content and direction of the site. Additionally, we have responded, where appropriate, with free feedback designed to promote critical thinking and further discussion. However, without exception, our on-line exchanges have never developed into a fuller discussion of the issues that we raise.

Our reflections on why visitors to the web-site do not choose to take advantage of our offer of free tuition has led us to speculate that the web poses a stiff challenge to drop-in visitors to a page to commit to work collaboratively when there is little or no prior personal involvement in material that is offered for general consumption. As disappointing as our experiences have been, we realise that this is an area for improvement and that the lack of effectiveness of a particular instructional design should not impede our collaboration. On the contrary, it should serve as a stepping-stone in the process of improving our pedagogical approaches based on our practical experiences.

The final area for discussion in this section concerns an essential characteristic of on-line materials. The fact that they are constantly modifiable is somewhat of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, digital production allows for materials to be written and preliminarily tested in ways that are distinct from traditional print-based publication practices. For example, “digital sketches” can be drawn in a non-threatening manner and then offered for comment to the Internet community. On the other hand, the challenge for electronic-designers is to leave a piece of work that may be incomplete. This reminds us of something that Voltaire said: “A work of art is never finished, merely abandoned.” Our experiences bear this sentiment out with digital media.

Moving Towards Successful Electronic-Collaboration

In closing, we propose that there is a positive path forward towards successful electronic-collaboration in the design and production of on-line English language learning materials. We maintain that for digital-age publications to be most successful, it is necessary for teachers working together to adopt collaborative production strategies that are experimental in nature and suspend closure on the finalization of material as far as possible. We hold these views in the belief that these strategies have the greatest potential to add value to on-line teaching and learning processes. Our credo is that student collaboration on-line can best be achieved when teachers and materials designers model this practice and collaborate in the same medium.

Finally, we present, based on our experiences and reflections, a list of points to be aware of when teachers wish to begin and maintain a collaborative relationship on-line:

- Start on the basis of shared knowledge (e.g. HTML coding) and common interests (e.g. Computer Assisted Language Learning),
- Build ideally on the strong edifice of a good face-to-face working relationship. The best results come when participants have experience working collaboratively, whether or not that experience is on the computer (Grudin, 1994),
- Exploit the power of e-mails for communication – remember that physical distance is not always a barrier,
- Collaboration cannot be effective between “unequal” partners – in vision, effort and communication etc.,
- Have a clear and agreed division of labour, and,
- It is crucial that the education system as a whole adopt collaborative learning as an important tool.

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