TELE-COLLABORATIVE LEARNING: DEFINING A PEDAGOGICAL MODEL

Phillip A. Towndrow
National Institute of Education
Nanyang Technological University
Singapore

Introduction

Typically, tele-collaborative learning involves the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) to extend the boundaries of the classroom. But the quality of the learning value extracted from the ICT used in tele-collaborative learning depends on the pedagogy employed in the design and implementation of the activities undertaken. Using language learning material taken from the Internet, this paper evaluates a "simple" tele-collaborative activity and then asks if there are any general pedagogic principles and/or a model that can be seen and/or derived from this material for application in wider knowledge domains. The argument proposed here is that in tele-collaborative projects that are limited in their scope to the exchange and sharing of information, the value of the ICT used is restricted and largely unexplored. In contrast, an alternative model of ICT-based practice is examined with the potential to extend tele-collaborative learning beyond what is normally considered possible in a print-based, classroom-bound learning context. The paper ends with a few discussion points concerning "tele-pedagogy".

Tele-collaboration: "Draw me a monster!"

Jane Scalpen's "Dessinez-moi un Monstre!" [Draw Me a Monster!] (http://www.stemnet.nf.ca/~jscaplen/monstres.html) is a project for students of French in Canada and other countries that exploits the Internet as a medium of out-of-class interaction. Following the registration of students as participants in the project, descriptions and drawings of a monster are prepared and sent to the project coordinator. Next, the written texts are redistributed mostly to individual participants who are then tasked to draw the monster in question from the description provided. Scope is also provided for learners to write descriptions based on original drawings. The project ends with the participants comparing their texts and/or drawings with the creators' originals posted on a specially prepared Web page.

Students' work on Scalpen's site provides evidence of imagination and active participation in the learning activity. Indeed, there can be little doubt that the "Draw Me a Monster!" project is fun and that it extends the boundaries of the physical classroom by providing a technology-based platform for language practice. However, in other important respects, the project is restricted and limiting.

Applying criteria from Towndrow and Vallance (2003) to gauge how much potential value is added with ICT to language learning tasks (see Table 1), it can be seen that the activity does not meet many of the criteria set and there are also some uncertainties. This evaluation signifies that the task has its weaknesses and that its ability to extend learning opportunities beyond the physical classroom is compromised.

In particular, "Draw me a Monster!" does not provide a means for students to know how well they performed. Although clearly explained, the relevance of the task in terms of the way it

addresses the students' language learning needs is questionable. The extent to which the task challenges students is also doubtful, as it seems to be a fairly simple feat to accomplish. There is only one way to complete the activity and this constrains the amount of "space" available for students to discuss and reflect on their performance. Overall, the parameters of the learning activity are limited to the exchange and sharing of information and as a result "Draw Me a Monster!" is categorised as a "simple" tele-collaborative project.

Table 1: Evaluation of "Draw Me a Monster!"

Clear	√	Meaningful	?	Beyond physical classroom	√
Relevant	?	Flexible	?	Beyond print	x
Interesting	√	Challenging	?	Promotes discussion	?
Assessment	x	Learner-centred	?	Promotes reflection	?

In terms of deriving general pedagogic principles and/or models for tele-collaborative projects from the "Draw Me a Monster!" material, it is necessary to liberate the space that exists both in and beyond the task so that all twelve criteria in Table 1 can be met. To do this, I will bring into service insights derived from collaborative learning methods that have the power to transform Scalpen's original task design. My suggestions build on the "Draw Me a Monster!" guidelines but they could equally apply to other topic areas and contexts on the understanding that participants work together in small, heterogeneous groups.

Tele-Collaborative Language Learning

The etymology of word "collaboration" suggests that collaborative learning involves getting people to work together. This is correct, but an intellectual component is also involved. As Mason (1970, p. 112) explains, collaborative effort places emphasis on "… open[ing] up the minds of members of a collaborative team to each other and to the possibilities that lie beyond the reach of any of the individuals". Thus, students in collaborative language classrooms are concerned with creating shared understandings. This is only possible when individual group member's inputs combine to produce knowledge that could not have been produced by those individuals working alone (Freeman, 1992). To create the space for collaboration to occur, a structure is needed that gives meaning and purpose to the students' interactions.

First, in order to maximise the language learning potential of "Draw Me a Monster!" it is necessary to "top and tail" the project by placing it within a scheme of work that specifies communicative outcomes thus pushing students to use their linguistic resources in meaningful and authentic ways. For example, prior to the Internet-based practice, classroom language input could involve students building their active vocabulary of body parts, physical attributes etc. Other preparatory sessions could focus on the organisation and distinctive grammar of descriptions. Once completed, these sessions would provide a context for the language practiced and a foundation for the evaluation and assessment of the language used in follow-up stages.

Second, the tasks need to be divided up between group members so that they work cooperatively and interdependently. Let us assume that there are five students from two classes in different geographical locations assigned to write a description of a monster. Individual group members are given responsibility for developing different aspects of the text as follows:

- Student A (Canada) - physical appearance
- Student B (Spain) - character
- Student C (Canada) - habitat
- Student D (Spain) - diet
- Student E (Canada) - pastimes

When the individual inputs are ready, they can be shared on an electronic discussion board. The group's next task on the discussion board is to negotiate the linking of the various parts, edit and agree on the final text. Throughout, group interdependence is assured because the text cannot be produced properly without the students' reciprocal effort. Furthermore, dealing with the spacio-temporal distance involved in working on the discussion board places additional emphasis on building effective working relationships.

Third, once groups have exchanged their materials and seen another group's attempt at trying to recreate their originals, opportunities are then available for groups in both geographical locations to analyse the effectiveness of their reading and writing skills. This can be done by exploiting the asynchronous features of ICT to discuss issues and benefit from opinions located beyond the physical classroom. To illustrate, let us say that one group writes a vivid description of a terrorist monster and is now looking at another group's graphic representation of their creation on the Web. The task for the authors is to determine why the artists failed to capture some features mentioned in the original description. Opportunities then arise for students to interact on-line with the artists in order to repair the text. The teacher could also intervene at this point by offering guidance and moderating the discussion as required.

A final possibility for collaborative work would be made possible with ICT once the groups' pictures and texts are available on specially produced Web pages. This time, individual students could be instructed to review a particular group's work and comment on it by posting a review on a Web Log or similar communication tool. Over time, a body of comment would build up that could help authors and artists assess the popularity and effectiveness of their work. This idea adds a further element of interactivity to the project work and ensures that the materials serve a purpose well beyond their production.

Discussion points

The problem as I see it with the original "Draw Me a Monster!" learning activity is that its objectives are not sufficiently well articulated. The project foregrounds the use of technology at the expense of wider and concerns relating to students' learning needs. If there is a single pedagogic principle implicit in the "Draw Me a Monster!" project it is that it is a good thing to share information over the Internet. This, in my opinion, is not nearly enough to sustain the requirements of something that we might to call "tele-pedagogy". Having said that, I am not sufficiently convinced that the use of the Internet requires the development of a new pedagogy because I fear the consequences of it morphing into a "technology as teaching and learning method".

My suggestions for improving the "Draw Me a Monster!" project are derived from good classroom practice and were made in an effort to tighten, but not constrain, the structure of the working space both in and around the learning activities. I propose, therefore, that sound tele-collaborative practice in wider domains needs to provide opportunities for learners to engage in meaningful, relevant and clearly-stated tasks. They also need to be able to discuss, negotiate,

reflect, and produce artefacts that help them develop useful skills and strategies for digital citizenry. Good technology can never, in my view, service weak task design and implementation. What is needed is a flexible approach that challenges students in the same way that good teachers do in regular physical classrooms.

I acknowledge that the presence of ICT in the classroom can, and often does, influence the course and direction of teaching and learning events but I maintain that effective learning must always come first. This focus can be maintained when teachers working, for example, in tele-collaborative environments share control of events with their students. To do this, teachers need to let students contribute freely, take risks and discuss matters openly. Whatever "tele-pedagogy" ends up as, it must allow students to truly benefit from working with each other. I have shown how I think this is possible through collaborative learning methods.

About the Author

Dr Phillip A. Towndrow is an Assistant Professor in the English Language and Literature Academic Group at the National Institute of Education, Singapore. His reading and writing interests lie in discovering the value of using ICT in teaching and learning. E-mail: patown@nie.edu.sg

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