Learning Together Apart

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Abstract: This paper defines collaborative learning as "individual learning occurring as a result of group process", and examines some of the issues and problems in using computer-mediated communication (CMC) for collaborative learning. A number of typical applications of computer conferencing, in both the educational context (where learning is the explicit primary goal, as in a course or training programme) and the organisational context (where learning might be a desirable, but secondary, outcome of a task-oriented activity), are reviewed. The influences of social climate, a text-based asynchronous communication environment, and software design features, on the success or failure of CMC for collaborative learning are examined.

Keywords: peer learning, cooperative learning, collaborative learning, process loss, organisational learning, computer-mediated communication (CMC), shared space, virtual seminar, online classroom, online games, computer-supported writing, distance education adjunct, lecture-room adjunct, education utility, project group, computer conferencing, message, organisational networking, social climate, software environment, interface design, groupware, lexical density

1 I am indebted to the authors of Enterprise Networking: Working Together Apart [16] for the inspiration for this title.
A Definition of Collaborative Learning

The thing that distinguishes collaborative communities from most other communities is [this] desire to construct new meanings about the world through interaction with others. The collaborative community becomes a medium for both self-knowledge and self-expression. [43, p. 48]

It is easier to describe what does not count as collaborative learning, than it is to produce a universally acceptable definition. Learning based on a transmissive or information-processing model of education, where the main learning activity is the individual reception and organisation of information from books, lectures, videos or computer-based training materials, is not collaborative. On the other hand, learners constituted into groups (e.g. a school class or a training group) are not necessarily learning collaboratively when they sit around talking before, after, or during a class. 2

It is important to distinguish collaboration from communication. Clear communication, and effective communication tools and channels, may be necessary pre-requisites for effective collaboration, but they are not sufficient. A good teacher, or an effective meeting chair or manager, equipped with flip charts, slides, and transparencies, may well be an excellent communicator, but will not necessarily know how to create and promote an effective collaborative environment (which, in any case, may not be a requirement of the situation). A lecture or a meeting may be an effective way of transmitting and sharing information, but it would be a mistake for the participants to believe that they are – in any real sense – 'collaborating' with each other in the process.

Most people kid themselves into thinking that they're collaborating when, in reality, they're just saying words. Traditional modes of discourse in no way capture the subtleties, the bandwidth, the power, and the degrees of interaction necessary for effective collaboration. Presentations and the usual modes of organizational communication are to collaboration what smoke signals are to movie epics; puffs of smoke in the wind just aren't as colorful or compelling as Gone With the Wind. The practical reality of collaboration is that it requires a higher order of involvement, as well as a different approach to sharing and creating information. [43, p. 29]

Etymologically, to collaborate (co-labore) means to work together, which implies a concept of shared goals, and an explicit intention to 'add value' – to create something new or different through the collaboration, as opposed to simply exchanging information or passing on instructions.

For the purposes of this book, we consider collaborative learning as any learning that takes place as a result of people working together, regardless of whether learning is the primary explicit goal of the collaboration (e.g. a training seminar or workshop) or is a secondary, incidental, outcome (e.g. a work team in which the individual members acquire new knowledge or skills from each other). Successful collaboration assumes some agreement on common goals and values, and the pooling of individual competencies for the benefit of the group or community as a whole – and the teamwork which this implies is more often a feature of work in organisations than it is of learning in schools or universities.

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2 Setting aside the part played by informal chat amongst children in school, which clearly serves important roles in language acquisition and in the development of shared understandings. [7]