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Developing learner autonomy through Facebook: problem-solving dynamics in online peer collaboration

Reference:

Peeters Ward.- Developing learner autonomy through Facebook: problem-solving dynamics in online peer collaboration IATEFL 2015, Manchester Conference Selections / Pattison, Tania - ISBN 978-1-901095-81-4 - Kent, IATEFL, 2016, p. 93-95

To cite this reference: <http://hdl.handle.net/10067/1478120151162165141>

Developing learner autonomy through *Facebook*: Problem-solving dynamics in online peer collaboration

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Peeters, W. (2016). Problem-solving dynamics in online peer collaboration. In T. Pattinson (Ed.), *IATEFL 2015, Manchester Conference Selections*. Paper presented at IATEFL Manchester Conference 2015, Manchester, UK (93–95). Kent: IATEFL.

Introduction

As a highly accessible online platform, the social network site *Facebook* serves as a learner support network in diverse learning contexts. At large, the network site is introduced to foster peer communication and collaboration, and is to encourage learners to actively participate in the learning process outside of the actual classroom. Learner autonomy, which is ‘characterised by a readiness to take charge of one’s own learning in the service of one’s needs and purposes’ (Dam *et al.* 1990: 102), is considered to be a prerequisite for and an outcome of effective online collaboration. In other words, when learners collaborate through social network sites in an attempt to advance in their learning process, they have to be able to identify learning gaps and set new goals. Since fostering learner autonomy in the context of social network sites has long been overlooked, the present study analysed the communication patterns and educational outcomes of first-year English majors when collaborating with their peers on *Facebook*. The findings were summarised in a model –based on Ghodrati (2015)– which demonstrates the different steps of online peer collaboration with the purpose of overcoming learning problems.

The Antwerp *Facebook* project

In order to gain insights into online communication patterns of learners in higher education, a *Facebook* project was established at the University of Antwerp, Belgium (2013-2014). The Antwerp *Facebook* project, a closed *Facebook* forum integrated into an academic writing course, functioned as an online support network in which students, without the interference of a tutor, collaborated on set learning tasks for a period of four months. Three monthly writing assignments –300-word essays which the students had to hand in individually– guided the online collaboration and functioned as the voice of the teacher. The students (N = 119) were all first-year English majors with Dutch as their L1.

Observations: Peer collaboration on learning problems

The participants in the project collaborated on the pre-designed learning tasks, working together towards a common learning goal. Additional to this collaboration, students took the opportunity to discuss task-based and curriculum-based learning problems which they experienced over time. In general, the process of collaborating in order to overcome these learning problems followed a well-defined pattern, illustrated in Figure 1.

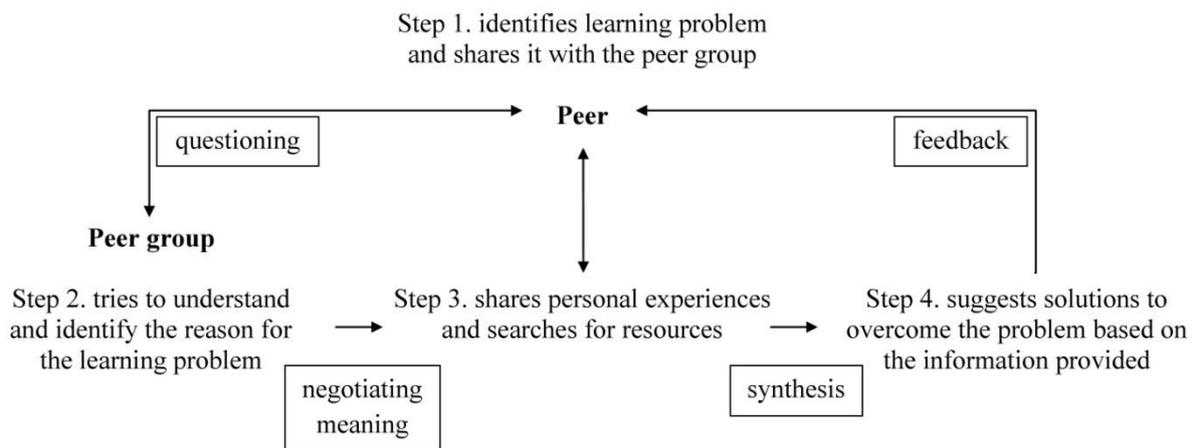


Figure 1: Collaborative problem-solving dynamics on social network sites (based on Ghodrati 2015)

The model depicts four stages of collaboration in which the peer and the peer group negotiate contents and meaning in order to construct solutions for a posed problem. This problem-solving procedure starts with the peer, who identifies a learning problem, introduces it to the peer group and prototypically tries to obtain tips and tricks to overcome the problem (step 1). Next, the peer group questions the peer in order to identify the reason and gravity of the learning problem (step 2). They negotiate meaning by sharing their personal (learning) experiences and integrating resources, providing the peer with different new insights and approaches (step 3). Lastly, members of the peer group provide feedback to their peer by suggesting solutions based on their personal experiences and the resources provided (step 4).

Developing learner autonomy

In part, learners exercise control over the content of the peer collaboration by introducing new, personal learning problems to the community of learners. The peer group shows that they are able to provide solutions by analysing the peer's issue, synthesising new information and sharing personal (learning) experiences. By doing so, they take ownership of their own learning (cf. Dam *et al.* 1990; Little 2004). This process is traditionally conducted by a tutor,

but in the present project was done autonomously as part of the online peer collaboration. Their collaboration shows that the learners on the *Facebook* forum act ‘in co-operation with others’ (Dam *et al.* 1990: 102), and exemplifies that the peers’ responsibility to improve was a ‘shared responsibility’ (Little 2004: 22).

Conclusion

Through online collaboration on a closed social network forum, learners in the present project are able to determine new learning objectives by identifying and defining their learning problems, and select the contents to be used to overcome the problem (cf. Dam *et al.* 1990). They partake in a collaborative process in which they decide on the viable methods and techniques in order to make progress in their own learning (cf. Little 2004). In the Antwerp *Facebook* project students exemplify autonomy by using the community as a soundboard and establish themselves as collaborative and social learners, sharing responsibilities and constructing an effective online support network.

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