

Chapter 61

Building Collaborations between University Pre–Service Student–Teachers and English Language Students through a Socially Mediated Network

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ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning has evolved over the years to include computer-supported elements within traditional and virtual classrooms. In this chapter, the authors discuss a collaboration that used computer-supported collaborative learning through a socially mediated network. This collaboration served as a bridge between two universities from different countries. Not only did this collaboration link the students from each university together, but it provided language learners and pre-service student-teachers with the ability to benefit from the unique connection between them (i.e. students needing to learn language and teachers needing to practice teaching a language). They discuss the collaboration, the framework, and the format of this collaborative project. Much of this discussion is rooted in the experiences of some of the students who participated in its evolution with the intent to provide a direction for implementing such a collaboration in other institutions.

INTRODUCTION

What do trilingual Mexican university students in a rural area have in common with pre-service student-teachers in an urban university in the U.S.?

Both groups utilized a socially mediated network to create a learning space geared toward their academic goals. The students in Mexico needed to practice and develop their English language skills (especially in developing cultural competence and

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conversational abilities), while the U.S. students needed to interact with and develop strategies for teaching English learners. We describe the framework for the creation of such a virtual space. We also describe and discuss the experiences of select students to illuminate the successes, challenges and lessons learned in utilizing computer-supported cooperative learning (CSCL) strategies. As this particular case highlights, collaborations can easily exist in virtual spaces through any number of platforms commercially available.

Collaborations can also serve as a bridge between universities from around the world. While there are many types of virtual outlets, the recent explosion in the availability of socially mediated networks have made collaborations an integral part of daily life for many (e.g. Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, LinkedIn, MyClassmates.com, etc.). In fact students, faculty and administrators turn to socially mediated networks in their personal and professional lives for many reasons. As Langhorst (2009) noted, people tend to gravitate towards virtual networks and, many times, are not hesitant to ask questions of individuals working collaboratively. In this way, a socially mediated network could be an appropriate choice as a bridge between universities because many educators and learners appear to have a preference for such collaboration simply because of its virtual nature. These virtual networks can also serve to link language learners together while allowing for the practice of language skills (De Felice, 2012). Additionally, these virtual networks are a great opportunity to have meaningful and more real experiences when learning a foreign language for students from rural areas where the foreign language is not available on a daily basis.

From within a rural area, this ability to interact with English language and culture may be difficult to accomplish without access to English speakers. One way of helping students work through language and culture at the same time is through collaborations online where authentic language experiences and meaningful interactions that are

deeply embedded with cultural norms occur. For a university located in Quintana Roo, Mexico, that has learning English as one of its foundations, there are a number of options that faculty and institutions may take to ensure these students complete their degrees while fully satisfying a language requirement for an additional language like English. Within such a rural location, access to English-speaking foreigners is quite restricted because the surrounding community speaks either Spanish or Yucatec Maya. In addition to the language requirement, the university emphasizes the ability to interact with sensitivity and understanding toward different cultures. The process of constructing relations between different cultures (often times referred to as interculturality) (Gu, 2009; Maldonado Ledezma, 2010) and the ability to engage in dialogues that contain mutual respect among diverse cultures (Haydon, 2006; Helfrich & Bosh, 2011) are key components of these language learners' coursework. With these goals in mind, the university faculty must look for multiple ways to reach these objectives.

For a university located in an urban city in Florida that has learning the ability to teach the English language to children as one of its state requirements, there are a number of steps that faculty and institutions can take to ensure those students are able to engage in and experience the act of teaching their language within a secure and controlled environment. While there are many outlets available within the city itself, there are numerous disadvantages to many of these choices. Given the importance of working with children, there are a number of regulations that inhibit direct interactions between those children and pre-service student-teachers (i.e. college students engaged in teaching degrees for working in elementary, middle, or high schools). Additionally, finding an appropriate time during the day for these interactions to occur is a separate logistical challenge. All of these disadvantages may be mitigated by the use of a virtual environment. By engaging in a private, secure space, the sensitivity

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