

Chapter VIII

Online Learning Conversations: Potential, Challenges and Facilitation

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to perform a thorough analysis of students' online learning conversations. Although offering a high potential for collaborative learning, successful online learning conversations are not easy to realize. After discussing the specific challenges of conducting conversations in general, conversations-for-learning and learning conversations online, the author uses this investigation to discuss ways to effectively facilitate them. Van der Pol demonstrates, then, that the context-creating effect of anchored discussion can effectively address some of these difficulties by turning opinion-oriented exchange of ideas into a more meaning-oriented processing of material, while increasing communicative efficiency.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a teacher in higher education: a teacher with a progressive state of mind and an enthusiasm for social constructivist theories who is continuously trying to improve the learning of his or her students, but is nevertheless still struggling to create successful and sustainable social constructivist teaching practices in his or her everyday life. Especially when trying to fulfill the promise of Computer Supported Collaborative

Learning (CSCL), this teacher may have trouble to deepen students' learning processes and to maintain students' initial levels of motivation and engagement after a fading first wave of technology-related enthusiasm. The needs and problems of this imaginary teacher are at the basis of the theoretical and practical issues I will report on in this chapter and they have determined its approach in four different ways.

First, in this chapter the use of CSCL is regarded as a means to reach a certain goal, and

it studies CSCL with deep or effective learning processes of students in mind. As indicated by Säljö (2003), introducing technologies in institutionalized forms of learning has not always lived up to the initial expectations in reaching these goals. In response to this observation, Säljö proposes to abandon the question of whether new technologies can improve learning altogether, because learning does not become better or more efficient, just different. However, I think it is still worthwhile to investigate whether it is possible to enhance learning through CSCL and how this can be done. Not only do I think that educational research is not neutral when it comes to learning, I feel it also has a certain responsibility. As the positive expectations about the advantages of CSCL for educational practice have been partially responsible for its widespread introduction, I think educational science should also investigate whether and how these expectations can be realized. I continue to believe in the potential of CSCL for student learning, albeit depending on many related variables and conditions. I therefore propose to direct research towards studying how to shape and develop the different (specialized) uses of CSCL in such a way that their learning potential can be better realized.

Second, seeing CSCL as a means and not as a goal in itself, I will be aiming for something more than the mere presence of online interaction. Andriessen, Baker, and Suthers (2003) distinguish between learning from a certain dialogue and learning to conduct that dialogue. Although the second learning goal will usually need to be reached to a certain degree as a necessary condition for reaching the first, by itself it may not be sufficient. In order to justify the investments in students' and teachers' time and the efforts that are required, I feel that it is important that students' efforts are directed as much as possible to activities that lead to and deepen learning, in relation to their content-related learning goals. As stated by Kirschner, Paas, and Kirschner (Submitted), it is important in collaborative learning to

maximize the students learning-generating effort (or "germane cognitive load") while minimizing the required interaction costs. In this way, it is possible to let students invest as much of the available effort as possible in the production of rich interactions.

Third, our concerns for educational practice have led to the choice of a form and area of CSCL where I expect to achieve the greatest gains. The area I will primarily focus on is students' processing of academic texts, using *online asynchronous discussion* in blended learning situations. As stated by Lapadat (2002) asynchronous online discussion is particularly suitable for the collaborative construction of meaning and presents a great potential for conceptual change. I will argue that online discussion is especially useful for the appropriation of abstract knowledge, which can still be seen as an essential activity in higher education and as forming the basic ingredient for the development of many required competences. The medium presents students with an open learning environment that allows interaction on a conceptual level. This "discursive" interaction offers the possibility for education to connect to the way students (initially) make sense of the material (Laurillard, 1993), while at the same time interactively stimulating them to expand this understanding to a higher level (Petraglia, 1998). By offering the potential for students to engage in an active, thoughtful and personally meaningful processing of content, it can facilitate the appropriation of new ideas and the deepening of existing understanding in a self-discovering way. Thus, the kind of online discussion I wish to realize is not so much a critical and opinion-centered debate, but a more constructive conversation that is aimed at the processing of content and a deepening of understanding. I will refer to this kind of discussion as "learning conversations," described by Bellamy (1997) as conversations that lead to learning because they allow participants to make connections between previously unrelated ideas, see old ideas in a new way, and

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