Chapter 53
Digital and Collaborative Work: Winning Couple?

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ABSTRACT

Do digital and collaborative work go hand in hand? This chapter combines the practical experience of two university teachers and literature to answer this question. Basic notions are revisited: Collaborative work, Distance learning, Social constructivism, Authentic learning to establish the winning conditions. Collaborative work implies three types of action, i.e. communicating, coordinating, and producing. Digital technology finds its place in each of these, given the great diversity of tools available. To promote collaborative work with digital, the authors propose to clarify teaching objectives, to vary digital and pedagogical tools, and to develop the evaluation of collaborative work. The practical experience helps to clarify the main constraints of remote collaborative work and to identify some key elements to be aware of. Several concrete examples illustrate the problems and possible solutions.

INTRODUCTION

Digital technology and technological tools (ICT) are proliferating. They are as much a part of our daily life as of our professional life. Smartphones, tablets, computers: the possibilities are manifold, varied and often easy to use. Furthermore, social networks reunite us with our childhood friends whom we had lost track of 20 years ago, our old university friends, colleagues we met during our first job. Online search engines enable us to research something we are passionate about, or the country we will visit on our next holiday, or even the symptoms we are suffering from. According to a recent survey, *digital life links people to people, knowledge, education and entertainment anywhere globally at any time in a nearly frictionless manner* (Pew Research Center, 2018, p. 3). But what happens when it comes to

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learning? We would use the technologies in a different way (Duguet & Morlaix, 2018) and probably less easily (Lison & Meyer, 2014), although digital uses are partly developed based on personal practices (Gremmo & Kellner, 2011).

When we think about learning into the context of higher education, it automatically calls for quality. So, many institutions of higher education nowadays choose to integrate digital technology into the courses they offer, even sometimes to "save" certain programmes by starting to offer them in a distance learning. Often conceived first and foremost in an economic perspective, this practice should above all be an opportunity to view teaching and learning differently (Puentedura, 2009), to question practices and to foster the development of new cognitive strategies, particularly in terms of information processing. These are elements that constitute part of the quality of education. In parallel with this movement linked to technologies, institutions of higher education in North America, but also in many countries across the world, increasingly consider the importance of implementing the foundations of constructivism and of social constructivism, thus assuming that what is learned is notably the "product" of social interactions. In this respect, Engeström (1987), in his model of collective activity, sees the subject as an individual or a group that carries out actions based on a collective objective. Thus, collaborative work may be regarded as a space in which the learners communicate, coordinate their activities and produce "a result". Considering the importance, today, of what one could call the "teamwork competency" on the labour market, it is not surprising that this is one of the configurations of the current academic reality. In this reality, it seems to us that digital tools may support or facilitate students' learning and teachers' practices, in a context that is intended to be authentic. This is at least what we would like, as a teacher and a researcher (Michaut & Roche, 2017). But what happens in the field? Can digital and collaborative work really be a winning couple?

This chapter supports the marriage of digital and collaborative work, at the level of a course or a program. It combines our experience in higher education with literature. We teach at all three university levels, including fully online programs in education. In such programs, learners must use technology to learn and collaborate with each other. The objective of this chapter is to provide a picture of the current pedagodigital context before defining collaborative work. The fundamental concepts are presented, e.g., distance learning, social constructivism and authentic context. Collaboration and cooperation are made explicit in order to distinguish them. The main issue is to respond to the question raised in the title of the chapter: is the marriage of digital and collaborative work possible? Our experience and literature allow us to present the main obstacles and winning conditions. To do this, it is important to clarify learning targets, use the right technologies and plan the assessment. Several constraints are presented to facilitate collaborative work in the pedagodigital context. The conclusion suggests presenting some examples of the use of digital technology in the francophone American university context in a reality of collaborative work.

BACKGROUND

This section of the chapter puts forward the current pedagodigital context as well as certain definitions, specifically with respect to collaborative work.