Chapter 18
A Theoretically Informed Approach to Collaborative Writing in EAP Contexts Using Web–Based Technologies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the need for a theoretically-informed approach to collaborative English for Academic Purpose (EAP) pedagogy and research. It discusses the relevance of online collaborative learning in EAP and the call for a theoretically-informed facilitative framework to guide the use of on-line collaborative writing tools to sustain learning communities and language learning. It establishes the importance of virtual learning communities as catalysts for online collaboration and discusses the need to examine technological affordances, adopting an ecological perspective to inform curricular design. The chapter examines the relevance of the Community of Inquiry model and its three presences: cognitive, social and teaching, as a theoretical basis to inform a facilitative framework to design online collaborative EAP writing tasks. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the interactions of these three presences, details on how they can inform online EAP collaborative writing practices and the need for future research in this area.

INTRODUCTION

Notions of literacy, writing and communication have dramatically been transformed through the use of Web 2.0 technologies that are inherently interactive, social, and at times, intensely collaborative. Writing in the 21st century has been redefined through our technologies and now requires "new social practices, skills, strategies and dispositions" (Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear, & Leu, 2008, p. 14) that are increasingly digital in nature. Wikis, Google Docs, blogs and social networking demand a participatory, interdependent and interactive approach to writing (Lankshear & Knobel, 2011; Tour, 2015) and have been shown to facilitate a sense of community, discourse and collaboration among English language learners (Kessler, 2009; Lawrence, Young, Owen, & Compton, 2009). Such interactive collaboration has the power to engage learners in meaning-focused tasks while drawing attention to linguistic form along with building autonomy and awareness of learning needs and strategies (Aydin & Yildiz, 2014; Kessler, 2009; Kessler, Bikowski, & Boggs, 2012). The affordances of these emerging online tools hold great potential to facilitate a range of academic and writing skills, learning strategies and transferable digital literacies relevant to learners in today's English for Academic Purpose (EAP) contexts.

Technologies like Google Docs and wikis enable EAP learners to revise each other's content through open editing where learners continuously refine, co-edit and build on each other's thoughts. Writing tasks in these intensely collaborative online environments can initiate and sustain interactions between students of various language proficiencies, while students compare their writing with peers, thus attending to various levels of form and meaning (Li & Zhu, 2013). Such collaboration affords learners a variety of roles such as tutor, coauthor, sounding board or editor (Storch, 2011). This multifaceted interaction enables a high degree of interdependence, autonomy, and can lead to the development of collective scaffolding where members of a learning community are both experts and novices, pooling knowledge and strategies, helping each other solve problems through the use of the English language (Li & Zhu, 2013; Storch, 2011; Stoddart, Chan, & Liu, 2016). Such intensely interactive writing can establish a process of continual collaboration in online and offline contexts that occurs during problem-solving and ongoing negotiation and has the potential to build classroom community. This heightened interaction enhancing linguistic input and output, combined with an enhanced sense of audience, can support a number of language learning benefits but can also present pedagogical challenges. Interactive writing technologies can enhance the importance of revision, reduce the stress of writing, build confidence and change the nature of writing itself (Ware & Kessler, 2013; Yu & Lee, 2016).

Studies in web-based collaborative language learning have aimed to understand the dynamics of the teacher, learner and task as they interact and change over time during interactive and collaborative activity (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, 2001, 2010). In this case, the Community of Inquiry model[1] was developed to examine interactions and identify relationships between social, teaching and cognitive presence in online learning (Garrison et al., 2001). The currency of the Community of Inquiry model for online language learning and teaching lies in its ability to describe and anticipate the collaborative learning process as it is mediated through Web 2.0 technologies. This model's application to language teaching and learning will be discussed in detail below.

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