

Learning by Collaboratively Writing in Wikis: a Strategy for the Development of Learners' Autonomy

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Abstract

In view of the emergence of ICT and of the need for collaboration as a process approach to learning, an urge to analyse computer-mediated collaborative language learning comes forward.

Communication is definitely today's goal when learning a language and we surely believe in the relevance of having learners constructing their own learning in an authentic context of autonomous collaboration. In this context, wikis emerge as a promising tool, once they enable learners to merge the advantages of collaborative synchronous and asynchronous edition with a history function that enables them to be aware and keep track of text changes as well as with a discussion function in an integrated forum.

The decade-long concern for oral communication has lately been replaced by a need to focus on writing, as the growing use of instant messaging as well as of social networks such as Facebook demonstrated that writing could also be a very communicative medium which easily promotes content and language integrated learning.

What is the impact of web peer review in wikis on learners' autonomy? What factors can be perceived as conducive to autonomy? What is the relationship between autonomy and learning in such a setting? In this paper I mainly aim at analysing the potential of this tool in the context of web peer review. I will be looking into collaborative writing through an international inter-institutional partnership as a strategy for the development of learners' autonomy in the regulation of their learning practices.

The case study I will present fits into various dimensions of a pedagogy for autonomy. I will be focussing on web peer review via an inter-institutional partnership as a strategy for autonomy in compulsory education. In the context of two particular schools, one in Denmark and another one in Portugal, which allow for teachers' autonomy in opting for practices that promote differentiated instruction, this project aimed to put teaching and research together in support of reflexive teachers and of the development and transformation of educational practices. This study assesses the implementation of a new teaching/learning strategy based on guided collaborative writing which, on the one hand, conducts learners to negotiation, reflexion and to the development of self-regulation skills and, on the other hand, conducts tutors to pedagogical negotiation triggered by this need to provide opportunities for the students to learn to learn.

Blended learning collaboration is definitely needed to face today's needs since globalisation and the emergence of ICT created an urge to invest in computer-mediated collaborative language learning. Wikis emerge as a promising tool for collaborative synchronous and asynchronous writing. Their history function enables learners to be aware and keep track of any text changes. Their discussion function makes it possible to debate these same changes. Furthermore, the decade-long concern for oral communication has lately been replaced by a need to focus on writing, as the growing use of instant messaging as well as of social networks such as Facebook demonstrated that writing can also be a very communicative medium. Jean Marie Schultz supports this idea with the help of Richard Lanham: "Richard Lanham (1993) argues strenuously for the integration of computers into the

humanities, and particularly into the writing curriculum, noting that 'The students we teach [...] are going to live - they live now - in a world of electronic text' [2]. Schultz also relates the ease of revision, which wikis, for example, offer, to the "[...] shift in the teaching of writing from an end-product approach [...] to a process approach" [1] and Rüschoff claims that research is needed "[...] to broaden the understanding of the effects and effectiveness of digital media [a particular hint at wikis is provided earlier] in output-oriented, creative and participatory language learning" [2].

Wikis put forward a tremendous opportunity for learners to build their knowledge since they can easily edit text, keep track/be aware of changes and negotiate their writing in syntactic, semantic, organisational and even stylistic terms – this is where part of their autonomy lies. It is this *linguaging* (cf. [3]) that makes their learning permanent. According to Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development, development is social and we can learn from more capable peers. Moreover, "[r]esearch into collaborative writing suggests that collaboration contributes to increased complexity in writing (Sotillo, 2000) and higher quality of writing (Storch, 2005) and can also be a source of student motivation (Kowal & Swain, 1994; Swain & Lapkin, 1998)" [4].

The case study developed from December 2010 to June 2011 was based on a collaborative writing experience between 26 Year-8 students of a private school in Portugal, Colégio Dom Diogo de Sousa (Braga), and 18 Year-8 students of a public comprehensive school in Denmark, Sct. Hans Skole (Odense). These students became members of gender and nationality-mixed writing groups guided by their Portuguese and Danish teachers in blended learning contexts.

Where does this need for cross-cultural collaboration come from? First, both Portuguese and Danish educational policies express a major concern for real language use [cf. 5]. Second, previous studies proved learners feel an urge to authenticate their learning.

Since the main target of the online component of this project was to improve learners' writing skills, we used Wikispaces as our online learning platform. The students participated in online writing tasks that explored different types of text. As the Portuguese National Curriculum is more binding and the Danish curriculum enables the teacher to choose topics more autonomously, the topics discussed in face-to-face lessons in the Portuguese school determine the writing topics.

Based on our perception of our students' learning profile and proficiency level, we first set up nationality-mixed groups of three and four elements on Wikispaces, which were sometimes adjusted for research purposes or according to students' preferences. On the homepage, we presented the main functions available on Wikispaces, described the assignment, set deadlines and pointed to aspects to be born in mind when writing the type of text demanded in the task. In our face-to-face lessons we gave students an introductory session on specific project goals as well as guidelines and on Wikispaces as an online platform for collaborative writing. Both the Portuguese and the Danish students discussed the topics (e.g., fashion, news) and type of writing (e.g., opinion article, newspaper article, summary) in their face-to-face lessons. As previously mentioned, these assignments were blended with students' English face-to-face lessons.

Each group was given a page with their names on the wiki. Besides other numerous functions, each page on Wikispaces contains 4 main tabs: Page, Discussion, History and Notify Me. Under Page they were able to write and edit text; under Discussion they had a standard forum; under History learners were able to see every previous version of that page, compare versions and revert to previous ones; and finally, under Notify Me, they could choose to monitor pages by being notified every time there was a page or discussion edit. Students were asked to collaboratively write text which all the group members should be allowed to edit through addition, deletion or substitution. They were also asked to use the discussion function to debate content and form (e.g., text structure, register), in particular specific formal changes which might not be clear to their peers, by providing a concrete explanation of the reasons underlying their editions. This tool was intended to make collaborative ties stronger.

For the present study three assignments were analysed. The first one consisted of an opinion text on *Where to eat and what to wear* and started in January 2011, the second one of a newspaper article based on given pictures in the context of the topic *Sounds, pictures and actions* and the third one of a summary of two videos within the previous topic. After the second assignment, the students answered a questionnaire to provide evaluation feedback. Together with the performance data, this feedback offers some insight into the potential of wiki collaborative writing, and peer review in particular, for the development of a pedagogy for autonomy. 37 out of the 44 students involved in the project answered the questionnaire.

Most students believe that the task of hetero-correction (Fig. 1) involved in peer review and associated to the use of the discussion forum developed their reflexion skills. They felt they had to be language-aware in order to be able to correct others. They also believe they were made aware of their language use as well as of their language learning process through others' correction of their own writing. One of the students writes the following: "i think i improved in writing because we wrote a lot in our texts and when something was wrong i understood why". This need for reflexion on correction is expressed by another student who said that "[...] sometimes I just got corrected and thats it. And that was annoying because I wanna know why". Some students also stressed the importance of the exchange of ideas and opinions in this same forum.

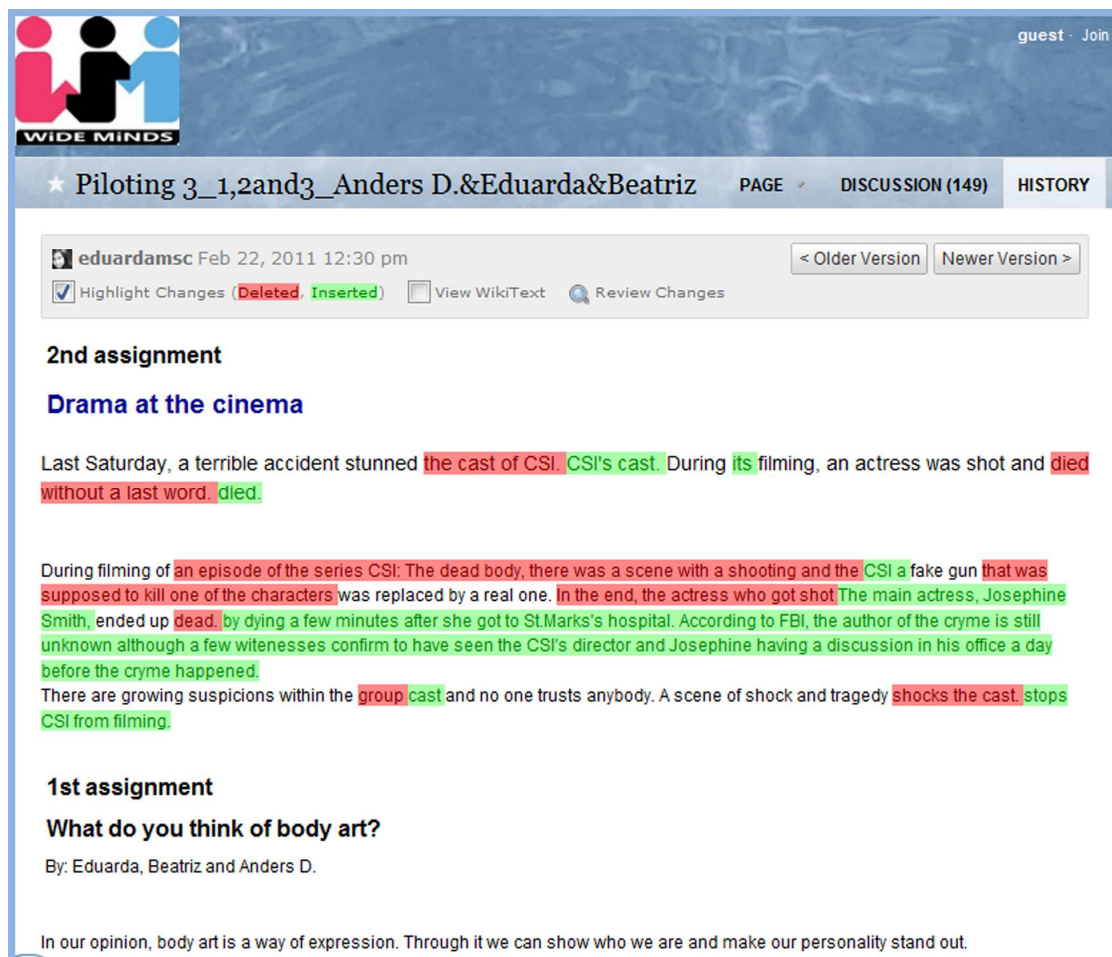
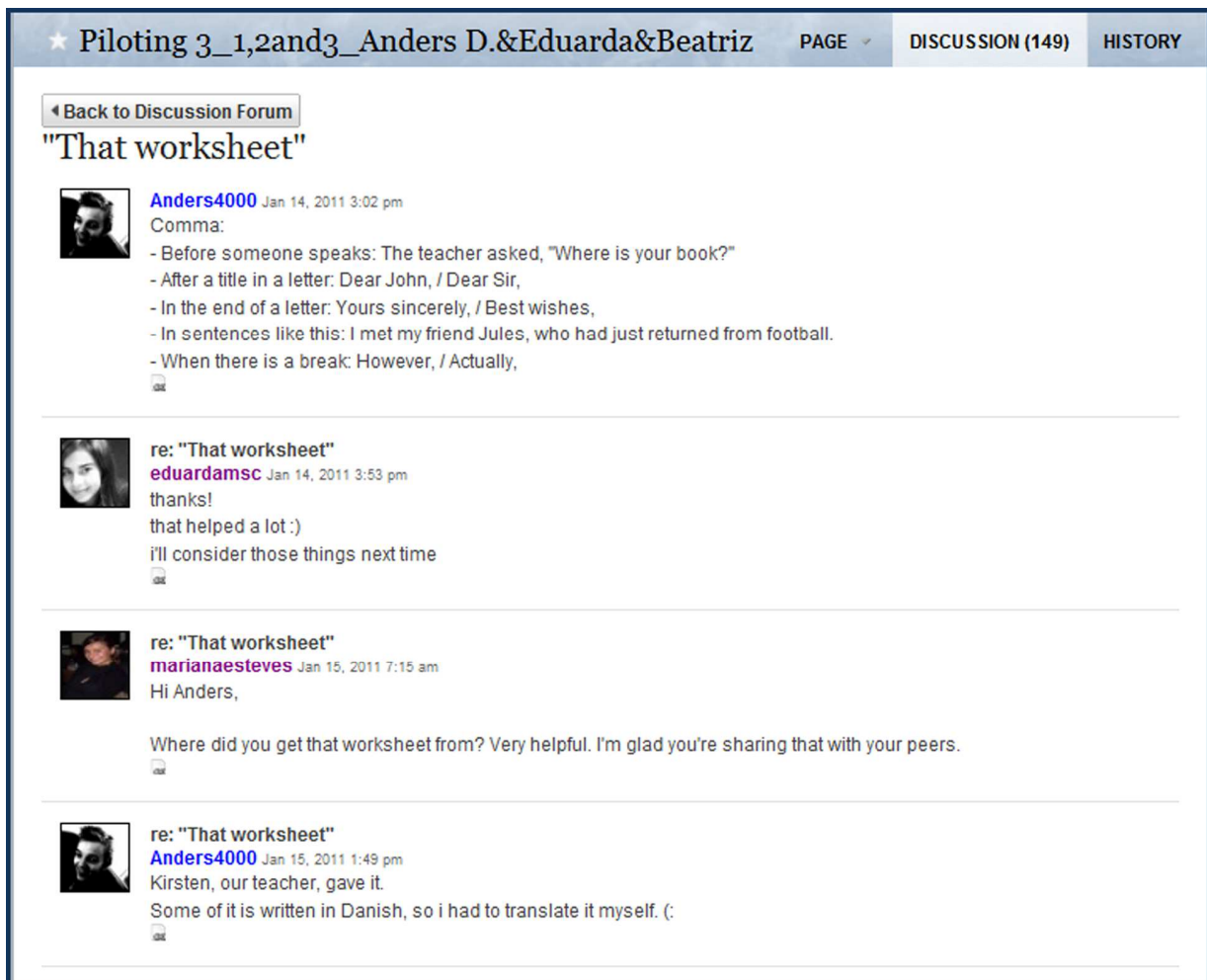


Fig. 1. Screenshot of the history function in Wikispaces

When asked whether they felt more autonomous when using e-learning materials and activities than without them (1=not at all and 5=more autonomous)¹, the average rating of autonomy was 3.3: 11 students chose 4 and 11 chose 3; 5 students opted for 5. As for why, one student said "[...] i didn't get


help from the teacher and in that way I felt more autonomous" and another one answered "yes, because when i used a dictionary or a web site i didn't need to ask anything to anybody" (cf. Fig. 2). Indeed, in most cases their perception of autonomy was strictly related to independence from the teacher but also to free resort to other means of support. However, when asked whether they believed a teacher could be replaced by a (more knowledgeable) peer regarding learning support, the average rating was only 2.6, with only one student choosing *definitely* and 9 choosing *not at all*. This might be related to the fact that students are still used to teacher-centred practices. According to them, even though peers share identical perspectives by belonging to similar age groups, teachers know more and are more professional. One student said that "[...] the teacher has many experience with our problems and our questions that the peer feedback don't". Notwithstanding, 16 respondents claimed they liked being autonomous very much and the average rating for this question was 4.2. Yet, only 12 students felt they sometimes played the role of a teacher, namely when taking responsibility, making important choices, helping and correcting peers, encouraging the other group members to work and giving suggestions. This way they became aware of how to take responsibility, the difficulty in making one's point clear and in understanding someone else's point, how to differentiate between aspects which should be dealt with individually or collaboratively, the need to be more tolerant in accepting one's own mistakes and to listen more carefully, and gained confidence.





★ **Piloting 3_1,2and3_Anders D.&Eduarda&Beatriz** PAGE DISCUSSION (149) HISTORY

◀ Back to Discussion Forum

"That worksheet"

 **Anders4000** Jan 14, 2011 3:02 pm
 Comma:
 - Before someone speaks: The teacher asked, "Where is your book?"
 - After a title in a letter: Dear John, / Dear Sir,
 - In the end of a letter: Yours sincerely, / Best wishes,
 - In sentences like this: I met my friend Jules, who had just returned from football.
 - When there is a break: However, / Actually,

 **re: "That worksheet"**
eduardamsC Jan 14, 2011 3:53 pm
 thanks!
 that helped a lot :)
 i'll consider those things next time

 **re: "That worksheet"**
marianaesteves Jan 15, 2011 7:15 am
 Hi Anders,

 Where did you get that worksheet from? Very helpful. I'm glad you're sharing that with your peers.


 **re: "That worksheet"**
Anders4000 Jan 15, 2011 1:49 pm
 Kirsten, our teacher, gave it.
 Some of it is written in Danish, so i had to translate it myself. (:

Fig. 2. Screenshot of the discussion function in Wikispaces

Most of them are sure that this experience fostered learning. On the whole, 28 respondents felt the combination of e-learning materials and activities with their normal lesson helped them learn faster than without them.

A thorough analysis of this data showed that wikis offer a great potential for developing learners' autonomy. The opportunity to collaborate with peers from countries whose mother tongue is entirely unlike their own causes various interferences in their spoken and written production and thus offers the perfect environment for peer review. What is more, a platform such as Wikispaces provides an excellent scenario for autonomy as it combines various functions that foster collaboration, negotiation and reflexion. It promotes the development of self-regulation skills that conduct learners to seeking the right means of support, to understanding the English language and their learning process and therefore being able to monitor it.

Further research is needed to, as reflexive teachers who facilitate the development of their students' ability to learn to learn, explore the most suitable conditions for autonomy to take place in collaborative writing in wikis.

Footnotes

1. Most of the questions use this scale in which 5 normally represents the highest positive answer and 1 the lowest negative one.

References

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