

Collaborative Learning Scenarios in dp Corporate's Blended Learning Foreign Language Program

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Abstract

dp develops language learning software and blended learning solutions for individual learners, international corporations, businesses, public institutions and universities (www.speexx.com).

Currently, the learning scenario of dp's corporate system is based on the blended learning concept and comprises the following didactic components: Online Software - Live training - Phone training - Virtual Classroom - Tutoring and Coaching.

All the didactic components are designed to facilitate an exchange between teaching content (software) or teaching agent (tutor or teacher) and learner; however, with the exception of the live training sessions, the learners themselves do not have the opportunity to interact with each other or learn together during the learning process.

This paper presents a concept, which examines the selection, implementation and use of collaborative learning scenarios within the framework of the standard teaching system, including the learning goals of foreign-language teaching methodology.

A special focus will be placed on the fourth skill – writing in the foreign language. In addition, a collaborative learning scenario for the appropriation of foreign language writing skills by means of a digital editorial tool will be outlined, analyzed and planned.

The goal is to find out if a collaborative writing scenario, within the context of corporate foreign-language training, is suited to increase learning progress significantly and engender a motivating influence on the learning process itself.

The knowledge gained here will help to develop a new didactic concept within the Blended Learning system; it will extend the company's methodological and pedagogical portfolio for corporate training solutions and improve the results of the individual language learning process.

1. Introduction

In the field of foreign languages, the Italian e-learning market offers a wide array of Web 2.0 activities geared towards supporting the learning process; however, web-based collaborative learning scenarios are hardly ever integrated into corporate training programs.

The significance of Social Media and Web 2.0 technologies in the field of e-learning, especially those involving collaborative learning, will, undoubtedly gain in importance in the years to come, not just in a scholastic environment, but also in a corporate one.

Within this framework, it would appear that collective language learning within a company is exactly the right context to implement collaborative learning methods because these promote a sustainable language learning process in general and the individual writing competency in particular.

2. Didactic Background

The collaborative learning scenarios within the Speexx foreign language learning program is based on the idea that the different learning media should serve to stimulate learning processes: "[It's] (...) not about finding the most error-free transfer of information possible, but about the motivation to learn through different learning avenues." [1]

Putting this learning concept into practice is quite complicated. One must not be tempted to define the learning medium without having first fixed the didactic goal. The characteristics of Web 2.0 seem to already contain in and of themselves many collaborative mechanisms, it appears to be child's play to apply them to a specific didactic field. But exactly the opposite is true because the application of complex didactic approaches to a web-based learning offer requires a careful analysis of the didactic background.

2.1 Writing – The Fourth Competence

The experience of recent years shows that the skill of "writing" within corporate training programs has strongly gained in importance. This is due to changing communication needs: today, there are many more occasions to write in a corporate setting than there were 15 years ago; for example, e-mail, social networks (personal or in-house), instant messenger, forums, reviews, etc.

Beginning in the 1990s, these changes began to be recognized in the field of foreign language teaching and the competence of "writing" is increasingly being regarded as a mediator rather than a target skill ability. [2]

Collaboration during the process of developing and improving writing skills promotes in particular "the utilization of one's existing knowledge (both in terms of content and language). [...]. During the collaborative writing process in particular, the exchange between participants, and their negotiation and decision-making processes have a positive effect on this extension." [3] Writing in a group also helps the individual to overcome his or her fear and perceive the writing task as less difficult. And since levels of motivation increase, the results are better too. [4]

These advantages are further increased through collaborative writing online because the internet promotes "the process of becoming active, interacting and communicating (and, in our case, this also means producing language) (...) and the establishment of communities (and that means: communities of verbal communication) (...)." [5] Learners become "proceiving" users – that is, they receive and produce content at the same time. [6]

But the medium that enables the writing activity is just one factor, many other factors also play a large role. Because of these, the advantages of web-based collaborative writing very often appear to be only "potential" rather than "concrete." "This is due in part to the following two reasons: Very often not enough thought is given to what collaborative writing actually means and which beneficial or debilitating conditions should be considered in the process." [7] This discrepancy is often due to a very poorly thought-out conception of collaborative writing exercises.

This way, aspects like "the group composition (e.g. the in-house hierarchy, the individual learning skills), tasks not suited to group work, missing incentives," [8] as well as a limited connection to the actual professional context are neglected in the conception of collaborative writing exercises. Often, the medium is selected because it is simply a "must-have"; its didactic use, however, is barely considered.

2.2. The Learning Goals

On the basis of this analysis, the learning goals of the collaborative learning scenario can be concretized as follows:

Thanks to web-based collaborative writing, participants discover ...

... how, during the writing of foreign-language texts, they can profit from other participants and

... how the writing of texts in the foreign language becomes more effective and efficient.

Success becomes visible, when ...

...the participants write better texts, in terms of linguistic quality, than those participants that are not involved in the collaborative writing process.

...the participants view writing in the foreign language as motivating and as a result not only write more, but also more confidently than before.

3. Integrated Learning Opportunities

Within the complex learning scenarios offered by the Speexx system, collaborative learning occupies its own position within a circular learning system.

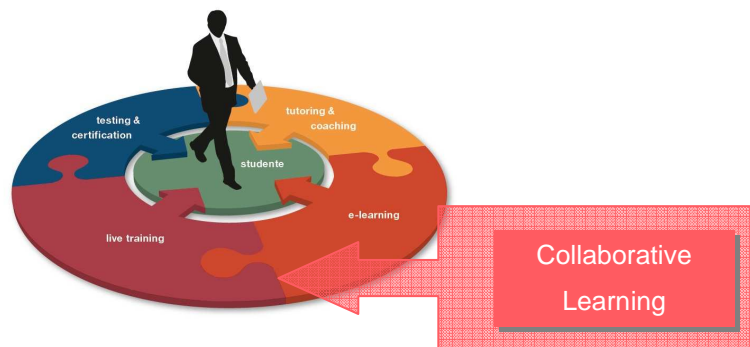


Fig 1: Integration of the learning scenario "Collaborative Writing" within the general concept of the Speexx system. (© digital publishing srl, 2011)

Collaborative writing assignments involve, on the one hand, the consolidation of previously learned content; on the other, new specific aspects regarding the writing skill are presented (e.g. discourse structures, etc.), as well as work context related content. The timing of the integration of collaborative writing phases is planned as follows:

Language Course – English B1.1 (digital publishing Premium)

	Learning week / Learning units (24)																							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24
Online Language Course																								
Live Training																								
Tutoring Assignments																								
Phone Training																								
Collaborative Writing Phase					1				2				3				4				5			
Test												a												b

Table 1: The teaching system's schedule – Own table

- Online language course: 24 units (approx. 90 minutes' study time per week for each unit)
- Live training: every two weeks (90 minutes)
- Tutoring: every week (one open and one closed question relating to online courseware)
- Phone training: every 2 weeks (30 minutes per unit)
- Collaborative writing phase: 5 collaborative writing phases, each lasting 2 weeks – duration of the individual writing exercise = 30 to 45 minutes

4. The Didactic Design

Collaborative learning activities require a special learning environment so as to work properly. In structuring the didactic design, a complex "set of factors of the learning context" has to be observed. [9]

The structure of the collaborative writing scenario is incorporated into the sequential structure of the entire Speexx course offering. This, however, only happens on the content level, whereas the skill of writing should be acquired in an explorative learning environment.

The assignments must be so formulated that they can only be solved through collaborative work. Furthermore, the learning scenario should contain discursive elements, which promote a discussion on the topic between the participants. Analysis, problem-solving and assessment assignments are particularly suitable as they activate the learners. It is important to ensure that the learning assignments are neither too difficult nor too easy as only the appropriate language level can guarantee continuous motivation. [10]

In terms of motivational psychology, the assessment of learning success by means of informative feedback is essential. The final feedback to the whole group should not just take into consideration the cognitive aspects (e.g. evaluating results of content), but also motivate (that is, the group dynamic, etc.). This way, the feedback serves to sensitize the participants to the group-work process. What is important is the provision of support (tutor, coach, etc.) in this learning context so that too much "freedom" doesn't turn into a lack of orientation. [11]

Furthermore, the group members should be able to work together so that a collaborative working atmosphere is created. Each participant should have a willingness to become actively involved and not just join as a "free rider." The definition of roles or responsibilities within the group as well as the ability to self-direct should not be neglected.

5. The Media

When selecting the appropriate media, a distinction must be made between learning media and communication media. Learning media are tasked with the responsibility of supporting and promoting web-based collaborative writing. To date, asynchronous applications (email, forums) or synchronous media (chat, video conferences) were primarily used in foreign language teaching; the interaction here was mainly one-to-one contact between learners and teachers.

The main focus here lies, however, with editorial tools, which enable the synchronous composition of texts from several participants simultaneously and which afford direct communication as well as speedy corrections and arrangements.

In the editorial tool's analysis, certain criteria were taken into consideration in order to ensure that online editing tools met the demands of the didactic design.

- The access as well as use of the collaborative writing tool must be intuitive and easy for people to understand.
- It must be possible to upload, organize, freely access and save texts in a file.
- The editing of a text by various participants must be transparent (versions view).
- Teachers must be able to add comments and provide feedback.
- A simultaneous chat function should be available to enable a real-time exchange.

Most of the criteria are met by the tool Google Docs since a wide variety of tools, which facilitate the formulation of concrete writing assignments, are at the author's disposal. [12] A big advantage of this editing tool is that it is very likely known to the entire target group and its structure closely resembles that of a Word document.

A 'writing forum' on the company server serves as a central communication platform between the coaches, the tutors and the work group (password-protected). Here, organizational questions (appointments, technical questions etc.) as well as didactic questions (questions about assignments, tips, etc.) can be discussed.

All specific information relating to the assignments themselves (e.g. corrections and comments) is, however, communicated directly by the tutors in the Google Docs documents, where also the communication between the members of the work group takes place. During the concrete editing of a text, members can discuss via the chat function (if possible in the foreign language), or comments can be left in the comment field. The foreign language itself is not just the object of instruction but the means of communication as well.

6. Outlook

The forthcoming pilot project will provide solid information as to whether the use of collaborative writing scenarios makes sense from a didactic point of view, to what degree it is accepted by clients and participants and which learning goals can in fact be attained.

Only within the framework of a truly meaningful didactic goal should this new learning form be integrated into the existing Speexx system, and only then should workplace training programs invest in this innovative learning method.

But it's not just the didactic concept that will be tested in the pilot project; the psychology of learning processes of adult group work within the framework of corporate training will also be examined – because a well thought-out didactic design has to contend with factors which are elusive or difficult to

define in advance. The challenge will be to organize all of these components so that they lead to a result which both the group and each individual can profit from.

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