



Nurturing Autonomy: Forming Wiki-groups for Online and Classroom Learning

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1. Introduction

There are many models of blended learning, but the common thread is an effort to find the 'best of both worlds' in the roles played by technology and teacher, online and in the classroom. In recent years, international efforts to experiment with blended learning in schools has provided increasing evidence of a pedagogy that enables the successful pursuit of a wide variety of educational objectives, including differentiated instruction, cooperative learning and the promotion of learner autonomy [2]. The adaptability of the approach – indeed 'blended learning' has been defined many ways in different contexts – has allowed the design of blended learning curricula that are tailor-made to balance the opportunities technology offers and the best practices of local schooling systems, at the same time working within the inevitable constraints of local resources, policies and practice. While schools in Hong Kong are among the most technologically well-equipped in the world, the persistence of the high-stakes exam-oriented culture of schooling has made nurturing student autonomy, a potential benefit of the blended learning approach, a challenging and elusive goal of current curriculum reform efforts. This paper presents a model of blended learning that might achieve some success towards meeting this goal: the formation of Wiki-groups within a large, first-year tertiary course at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. Students' attitudes towards the approach and their perceptions of its benefits and challenges are also presented.

2. The Autonomy Project

The English Department at the Hong Kong Institute of Education prepares English subject teachers for qualified teacher status in primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. Undergraduate students in the department study for a four-year B.Ed. degree. A research team in the department undertook to implement and analyse a variety of pedagogies that might successfully encourage these students to move away from the more passive, 'spoon-feeding' model of participation familiar from the primary and secondary levels towards a higher degree of autonomy in the early stages of their higher education. The participants in the project, as B.Ed. students, are part of a pre-service teaching training program that positions them to benefit from increased learning autonomy not only for their own sake but also for their future students. The realization that innovative methods utilized in their own learning experiences also serve as models of pedagogy for their own professional practice was sometimes made explicit in students' reflections.

The autonomy project research team designed a wide range of educational activities for undergraduates in the program. These activities included interactive assessment-for-learning; individual language advising; peer teaching opportunities; reflective journal writing, and the focus of this paper, the student-authored Wikibook textbook project. Descriptions and data for all the activities can be found online at the project website <http://www.learner-autonomy.org>.

The starting point with respect to autonomy for the students participating in these activities intended to nurture 'greater' learning autonomy was modest. The project took into account that most Hong Kong students, as well as those arriving from Mainland China, embark on higher education studies from a state that is decidedly teacher-dependent. Active, independent questioning of lecture content, for example, is all but unheard of in the first-year university classroom. It was felt in this context that while the encouragement of initiative towards autonomy must explicitly allow students space, it must also be delineated very clearly. As Littlewood [6] suggests, the notion of autonomy in education is a spectrum that includes both 'reactive' and 'proactive' autonomy; reactive autonomy being that wherein 'learners organize their resources autonomously to reach a goal that has been set' for them (p. 29). Reactive autonomy precedes the more proactive kind wherein students are responsible both for setting their own goals and deciding the means of achieving them. The framing and predetermined objectives of the autonomy project activities offered students a flexible and encouraging context in which to make pathways along the spectrum from the reactive towards an increasingly proactive autonomous skills-set.

3. The Wiki-groups Blended Learning Design

Yamauchi [10] found that the use of IT tools and online communities in the EFL classroom had a positive, motivational force on students, though there was less evidence that it was correlated to improved learning. The Wikibook project aimed to use the benefit of wiki-collaboration to improve both students learning – by increasing their autonomy – as well as their comprehension of content – by increasing the interactions with and accountability to content sources and analyses throughout the duration of the course. Prior studies conducted by Lin [5] on the Wikibook community at large and by Kidd, et. al. [4] on the benefit of student-authored Wikitextbooks assert that Wikitextbooks, by harnessing technological efficiency, collaborative communities and content, may be the 'textbooks of the future.' The Wiki-groups project leaders aimed to put that view to the test. The only textbook for the course was the student-authored Wikitextbook.



The participants of the student-authored Wikibook project were 162 first-year, first semester English major undergraduates in the core course, *Introduction to Language Studies*. Students were divided into five tutor groups that met once-a-week, during which the in-class portion of the blended learning activities took place. In the tutorial, the students were further divided into nine or ten Wiki-groups of three to four students each. The designation 'Wiki-group' is a reflection of the primary responsibility of each group, the co-authoring of one chapter of the Wikibook textbook. Each Wiki-group constituted a working group that together was responsible for all the group activities of the course, both in and out of class, with each group assigned one of the ten thematic topics into which the curriculum of the course was divided. Examples of the course topics include 'Functional Grammar', 'Pragmatics' and 'Computational Linguistics'.

The activities for which each Wiki-group was responsible included:

- **Student-authored Wikibook textbook chapters** – The small groups of students worked together to write a comprehensive chapter on their assigned topic *in advance* of the lecture on the same topic. The chapter was posted and edited online at the course Wikibook on Google Sites. The ten topics of the textbook were preselected by the course instructors and randomly assigned to Wiki-groups; membership in the groups was self-selected.
- **Online student feedback** – In addition to reading the Wikibook textbook chapters online each week, all students were required to offer detailed comments and feedback online on their classmates' chapter each week. Based on this feedback the authors would then edit and revise their chapter.
- **In-class oral presentations** – In order to offer Wiki-group members an opportunity to strengthen their oral presentation skills as well as articulate the essential aspects of their chapter, each group made an oral presentation of their chapter content in the week following the posting of their draft chapter online. The oral presentations also helped other class members to focus and revise the topic content.
- **Asynchronous online quizzes** – Each week an online quiz was required, though students could take it at any time during that week at their own convenience. Quizzes were ten-question multiple-choice, with questions randomly selected from a database of 50 – 100 questions for each topic. Students were encouraged to retake the quiz as often as they liked until they were satisfied with their score. As a result, the majority of students regularly retook the quizzes as many as five times or more.

4. Design Concept and Considerations

The Wikibook textbook project presented students with these blended learning activities in order to offer them a range of learning obligations, choices and opportunities. The design of the activities aimed to *require* students to undertake necessary research, cooperative learning, academic writing and oral presentations in English, while at the same time *inviting* them to experiment with or explore increasingly sophisticated degrees of learning autonomy. The extent to which the Wiki-groups were characterized by cooperation among group members or creativity in oral presentations, for example, was flexible and varied considerably. In contrast to O'Shea, et. al's [8] Wikibook project in the United States, which emphasized individual over group assignments, Anzai [1] observed that in Japan collaboration was a highly appreciated aspect of the EFL wiki writing experience. The Wiki-groups project aimed at harnessing this potentially potent motivating force. Roles traditionally associated with the instructor, including organizing discussions, assigning groups, giving written feedback, lecturing students, and selecting appropriate reading content, were all shared by the students in each Wiki-group. The success of the groups in tackling what they had first considered 'too much work' resonated in the interviews with students in the many self-reported instances of increased confidence.

Indeed, though only in their first semester of university study, the students were expected not only to master the linguistic content of the course, but also write a formal academic paper and make formal presentations, most of them for the first time, all in their L2. The students' perception that this was ambitious was both expected and somewhat encouraged by instructors. It was expected considering the students' previously limited experience with any substantial degree of autonomy in their learning; and it was encouraged by instructors as a kind of positive pressure that might motivate the students to take initiative and rely on self and peer sources of support for their learning. As Kelsey noted [3] in a study of student collaboration while writing wikis, "Students worked through the crisis of authority and relationship, to resolution through negotiation (p. 164)." In anticipation of this, the design of the project prepared constructive challenges with a clear context and ample support for crises rather than any pretence of trying to avoid them.

In the Hong Kong context, as it would be in most places, the Wiki-groups project was innovative. Students themselves were responsible for developing a considerable share of the content, and the whole class was then responsible for learning it. This approach brought currency to the course topics, with abundant illustrations and examples from the students' own experience. It also challenged the notions of authority, provoking questions about which sources should be considered valid or legitimate, a judgment students had to make in concert with instructors. As Ravid also found in Israel [9], such an approach legitimizes the students' research efforts, provides an authentic and invested audience of readers, and empowers students as participants in the hierarchy of academic authority.

5. Student Perceptions of the Wiki-group Project

Questionnaires were completed by about half of the project participants from three of the tutor groups, with a total of 83 collected: 29 from Group A, 32 from Group B and 22 from Group C. Focus-group interviews were also



conducted with a total of 38 students from these three tutor groups. Focus-group participants represented a wide range of the Wiki-groups within each of the three classes, with 10 students from Group A, 15 from Group B and 13 from Group C.

Overall, students reported a highly positive perception of the efficacy and benefit of the blended learning model of Wiki-groups in helping them to become more autonomous learners. In response to the final, summative statement of the survey, "I have become a more autonomous learner through this course," well over 90% of students in all three groups responded positively, agreeing or strongly agreeing with the statement. In questions more narrowly focused on the discrete activities of the blended learning project, the results were also positive. In response to the statement, "I learnt to take responsibility for developing my own academic reading and writing skills through the Wikibook project," for example, again more than 90% of all respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. When the focus of the statements was on the personal rather than academic skills associated with autonomous learning, there were also positive responses. For example, a majority of all three groups agreed to the statement, "When I had a problem with my learning in this course, I took the initiative to find a way to solve it."

The students' impressions of the benefit of the Wiki-groups were revealed in more detail in the extended discussions of the focus-group interviews. Students commented extensively on the technical aspects of the Wiki-group tasks and how the context and support of the groups allowed them an effective opportunity to learn. Many students reported feeling confident they had learned to improve the organization, grammar and formatting of their academic writing. They reported benefiting from the specific online feedback of their peers on the technical aspects of writing, and feeling they were able to improve study, time-management, critical thinking and problem-solving skills that might contribute to more autonomy in other courses in their program as well. Some students explicitly appreciated the project design allowing them "to explore and to be creative" and giving them the "freedom to work on their own." While some students vocalized their wish that there had been "more guidance" and "clearer instructions" as well as other concerns, such as too little training in the technological requirements of managing Wikibooks, the majority acknowledged that in both process and product, the activities of the Wiki-groups contributed meaningfully to their growth as more capable, confident and independent students.

6. Conclusion

The Wiki-groups Project at the Hong Kong Institute of Education offers a model of blended learning that harnesses technology, traditional support and the motivation of peer cooperation. The project enabled a range of language skills, content knowledge, cooperative learning and autonomous learning objectives to be integrated into an effective learning environment for first-year English majors. Evidence that the design efficacy includes improved academic writing results and a strong perception among student participants of the benefits of the project, including increased confidence in writing, oral presentations, working cooperatively with peers and managing their own learning.

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