

COLLABORATIVE E-LEARNING IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA (EHEA): TOWARDS A PEER-ASSISTED CONSTRUCTION OF KNOWLEDGE

Anna M. Brígido Corachán

Universitat de València
Anna.Brigido@uv.es

Anna M. Brígido Corachán (PhD in Comparative Literature. New York University. PhD in Lingüística y Retórica Inglesas. Universitat de València) is a full-time lecturer at the University of Valencia. Her areas of interest are contemporary Anglophone literature and the English language, ethnic studies, literary theory and politics, narrative and film, cross-cultural education, and e-learning. She has published articles in American Anthropologist, Quaderns de Filologia and Lenguaje y Textos.

In this essay, I consider the use of virtual forums as didactic tools that foster peer-interaction and collaborative learning, and which contribute to a non-hierarchical construction of knowledge in the classroom. Online forums enhance students' interactive, rhetorical and problem-solving skills –abilities that will be crucial to them in their subsequent professional careers. I also propose several methods to activate and monitor such forums in a positive, time-efficient manner for the lecturer, and which strengthens many of the learning skills put forth by the EHEA (European Higher Education Area).

INTRODUCTION: DEVELOPING NEW LEARNING SKILLS WITHIN THE EHEA

The EHEA (European Higher Education Area) and its resulting academic manifestation, the ECTS (European Credit Transfer System), are dramatically changing the way we envision teacher/student learning dynamics at university level. Overall, students are encouraged, more than ever, to be responsible for their own learning practices, as instructors devise new modules that strengthen a student's autonomous ability to search for, organise and assess information. This information is then put to use in creative processes of knowledge-construction. In this manner, students do not merely acquire or learn content but actively build it up, producing cognitive output that is solidly grounded in their field of studies, and of scholarly and social value in their future professional careers.

One of the social skills that is often highlighted in the EHEA plans of studies is the ability to work as part of a team, to collaborate actively with others, putting resources and efforts together in order to enrich the process of knowledge construction in a manner that is multidirectional. Thus, the exchange of data does not merely go from teacher to student, but is actively initiated and shared by all members of the *classroom team* – including the teacher, who is often seen as a *facilitator* or *guide* in the discussion.

Small group or team work (usually consisting of two or three members) is one of the traditional methods instructors have used to foster this practice of peer-assisted learning. Group work and peer-tutoring practices are, without doubt, extremely beneficial, as students establish non-hierarchical, trust-based relationships with their classmates and are thus able to disclose to them many cognitive difficulties and misunderstandings

that are often embarrassing to admit in front of a lecturer (McLuckie and Topping, 2005: 568). However, in my experience, unmonitored group or pair work often leads to *classic* situations where one or two students perform all the tasks, and the remaining students (in a parasitic, rather than collaborative relationship) exploit their peers' efforts and get undeserved credit.

VIRTUAL FORUMS: STRENGTHENING COLLABORATIVE E-LEARNING

During the past year, I decided to introduce a different method to foster collaborative work in an open space that all students could access at any time, and where they could *all* learn from one another (not just from a peer-tutor) in an altruistic manner.¹

I proceeded to set up a *virtual forum*, a tool available in most blackboard e-learning systems (*Aula Virtual* or similar software products, provided by universities in the EHEA group), but that is, understandably, often disregarded by instructors, who either favour face-to-face exchanges in the classroom, or who are dissuaded by the amount of time and effort that is required to activate and monitor such forums.

In October 2007, I created a virtual forum for each of my 2nd-cycle literary modules in the Department of English and German Philology, at the University of Valencia (*Pre-19th Century British Theatre*, *Translation of English Literary Texts* and *World Literatures in English*), and found them to be easily-accessible, user-friendly, and inexpensive tools that became instantly popular among a surprising majority of students. For the most part, online forums functioned as a dynamic and interactive space that fostered cognitive engagement, critical literacy, as well as autonomous and collaborative learning. The forum also provided students with further opportunities to strengthen language acquisition and argumentation skills in a creative and flexible manner beyond the classroom setting. Furthermore, as it is an inherently flexible and fairly intimate space, the forum proved to be particularly beneficial for students who tend to be more reserved in face-to-face settings, and for those who could not attend classroom lectures and seminars on a weekly basis due to

professional or personal reasons. Thus, as McLuckie and Topping have previously suggested (2005), these online forums helped to redistribute power relations, which in a virtual environment tended to be more peer-based than in the classroom (where they can be dominated by unidirectional exchanges with the instructor), and fostered collaborative interactions among students who had barely talked to one another before.

Although they share many characteristics, *collaborative* e-learning is not the same as *peer-assisted* learning (PAL, where one student assists another, and thus functions as a tutor of sorts), nor *cooperative* learning, where the work is subdivided into specialised tasks. As Slotte and Tyunjäla (2005: 193) underline,

Collaboration [...] involves the production of a joint outcome and thus demands sharing and generating new knowledge together with one's peers. In this way, it provides individuals with better opportunities to use higher-order thinking skills and problem-solving skills in the construction of their ideas about practice.

As I mentioned above, although the potential of collaborative learning through virtual forums is well-known by most faculty, many instructors are dissuaded from using it by the fact that moderation of such forums can be extremely time-consuming and that the forums themselves may have "*limited effectiveness*" (McLuckie and Topping, 2004: 563). As Thomas has pointed out, learners in such forums often have to navigate through many incoherent structures and mistaken interpretations (Thomas, 2002). I argue, however, that students can also learn from each other's mistakes by having to ponder and resolve clashing voices and expositions of data, which in turn makes them consider the relativity of interpretation, and the need to assess data in context. They thus develop critical thinking skills with some help from the instructor and from more advanced classmates who often act as spontaneous moderators/cognitive guides.² One of the most positive advantages of virtual forums is that students often improve their rhetorical skills by mimicking each other's syntactic structures, discursive transitions, and choice of vocabulary. Last year, I noticed that many

students using the forum in a habitual manner slowly improved their expository skills and gained useful vocabulary and expressions that they later used in their final papers and exams. They were immediately aware of which students exhibited more complex critical capacities, and a higher level of lexical and syntactic expression, and then proceeded to adopt, in several cases, many of these advanced students' rhetorical tricks.

We should also consider that collaboration and interactivity, as Thomas points out, are social and academic skills that students do not possess inherently. Therefore, interactivity –that is, students actively engaging each other's postings in a coherent manner that leads to the construction of personal and collaborative meaning, so that discussion threads do not become what Thomas (2002: 359) denominates “*poorly interrelated monologues*”–, needs to be learned. In fact, interactivity and collaboration are skills that will be of wide use in students' subsequent and professional careers regardless of the field they choose to work in (academic institutions, private firms, etc.). Furthermore, beyond the acquisition of specific curricular content and the construction of meaningful output, collaboration in the forum strengthens social relationships, builds the students' self-confidence, and heightens their trust in one another and in the instructor. Trust and self-confidence among the participants are key elements in fostering an appropriate learning environment (Slotte and Tynjälä, 2005: 203), and are often difficult feelings to foster when managing groups of over 80 students.³

I found that setting up a virtual forum was an efficient tool in initiating the sharing of experiences and insights, as it encouraged students to be motivated and interact with each other, and with me, from week one. This year –and following Lam (2004)–, I have also opened an informal thread that functions as a literary café of sorts, where students can exchange information that is not strictly academic, as a way of breaking the ice, and in the hope that social interaction will contribute to enhance their motivation and, therefore, their level of cognitive engagement with the subject matter.⁴

FORUM GUIDELINES: INCREASING PARTICIPATION IN THE FORUM

Encouraging collaborative practices is crucial to building knowledge collectively, out of a body of information units/core contents, which are thus assimilated in a more effective manner. Moreover, team work enhances values such as tolerance, generosity and non-competition to reach a common goal.

In order to increase the number of argumentative interactions that lead to the construction of academic knowledge and the negotiation of an informed viewpoint, the instructor needs to be an active *facilitator* of the discussion in the forum. For example, it is convenient to implement some guidelines of forum use, user protocols or, as Richards calls them, “*group etiquette*” (2000), which shows students how they ought to interact with one another in the virtual space. These guidelines will obviously be adapted to the objectives set by the instructor regarding the forum, and the role that this tool may play in the module. The instructor should also be clear with his/her expectations from the start, emphasizing to students that they must avoid plagiarism and any offensive remarks and keep their contributions non-repetitive, respectful, focused, engaged with previous comments, and concise. Students who open new threads should also label them in a descriptive manner, detailing the overall content and purpose of their comment, so it opens, rather than blurs, a discussion.

Whether it is the instructor or any student-assistants who act as *facilitators* of the discussion, having forum moderators is the keystone that enhances the dynamism of the forum and determines its potential success or its failure. Moreover, to encourage intelligent forum use from the beginning, the teacher also has to provide ice-breaking tasks that guide the students towards the fulfilment of specific course objectives. This can be done by means of questionnaires, case-studies, problem-solving activities, or exercises that compel students to find and share textual evidence in assigned readings or in the core bibliography. Additionally, the forum can be used to continue

and wrap up discussions that are left unfinished in face-to-face classroom debates. The virtual forum can also be deployed as a warming-up platform where students can brainstorm ideas prior to the composition of written assignments and essays or, as Warschauer points out, as a “*prelude to oral discussion*” (1996: 22).

Furthermore, Moore and Marra (2005) suggest giving students specific problem-solving activities to develop constructive argumentation. For example, students may categorize their postings and insert them within previously organized, scaffolded discussions where each student contributes to the argument in a constructive manner by modifying, supporting, or challenging the main lines of thought proposed by the instructor. In the appendix to their article “Transferable skills for online peer learning”, McLuckie and Topping also provide a series of questionnaires and suggestions that can be extremely useful when teaching our students interactivity and “*process skills*” to build e-learning in a productive and equal manner (2004).

CONCLUSION

Virtual forums are extremely useful tools to foster collaborative and multidirectional e-learning in the classroom. They are also effective

in building the students’ self-confidence and trust in one another and in the instructor. For example, students who lack confidence in their judgement or in their critical thinking skills are often rewarded with direct answers to their postings from other students and from their teacher –a positive confirmation that encourages them to proceed with their ideas.

I have also observed that peer-tutoring also develops spontaneously in the forum, with one student actively assisting another after a plea for help. Thus, students take active responsibility in the success of their peers’ cognitive progress together with their own. In this respect, forum participation seems to benefit students with two types of personality traits: insecure and unmotivated (as the latter may be dragged into the discussion by the heightened engagement of their classmates). It also provides students who cannot attend face-to-face discussions with a platform where they can communicate easily with their classmates, take part in the collective construction of knowledge, and learn from one another. Overall, forums strengthen interactive and problem-solving skills, help to build a classroom environment governed by trust and collaboration, and enhance students’ active involvement in class discussion, which is often limited in modules taught to large groups.

Notes

- ¹ I should point out that such *altruism* was greatly facilitated by the fact that meaningful participation in the classroom and/or the forum was assessed. Through the forum, the instructor was also able to monitor which students were being more collaborative and generous in their contributions, and which students were more open and honest about their points of confusion in requesting peer/instructor-help –requests which, in turn, activated further sharing of information/advice from fellow classmates that, in most cases, led to collective constructions of knowledge.
- ² It is convenient, in fact, to spot these advanced, more engaged students early in the semester, and to encourage them to help actively with forum facilitation. When in doubt, students should also be reminded that information must be well researched and compared with texts from their core bibliography.
- ³ For example, in my experience, participation in the forum clearly contributed to an increased participation in face-to-face discussions. Forum comments encouraged students to enrich classroom discussion with further contributions, and thus enhanced three language learning skills: writing, reading and oral expression. See my unpublished study “From the Virtual Forum to the Classroom: Developing Cognitive Engagement and Critical Thinking Skills through Online and Face-to-Face Student Discussions”, where I provide statistical evidence regarding this matter, focusing on one of these modules (*Pre-19th-century British Theatre*). Suffice it to say that most students who participated often in the forum (29 out of 31 forum contributors) passed the module comfortably, clearly improved their expository skills, and mastered the subject matter.
- ⁴ For a study that focuses on the building of a social dynamic that leads to collaborative learning in online (distance) education, see Betty and Becky Cox (2005).

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