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Increasing Student Engagement through Collaborative Learning Outside the Classroom

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Abstract

Several factors, including the Bologna process, the embargo on university posts and a larger student population pursuing degrees, have contributed to radical changes in teaching, learning and assessment in Irish Higher Education in the last few years. Challenges to academics have resulted in curriculum reform and, most importantly, in innovative practices in which the curriculum is delivered and assessed. It was in this context that a collaborative component has been introduced into a Level 2 Spanish Language module at University College Dublin.

This paper presents the rationale for introducing a collaborative learning component into this module and it describes the self-directed tasks completed by the students. A small action research project has been undertaken to explore the students' views about this innovative way of learning. The paper addresses the extent to which collaborative learning outside the classroom contributes to the enhancement of student learning and it examines the obstacles encountered by the students during the semester. The discussion of the findings focuses on feedback from the students and on group reflections submitted via Blackboard, the University's Virtual Learning Environment.

1. Introduction

Collaborative learning has proved a difficult concept to define (Panitz, 1996) [1]. Although it is sometimes used interchangeably with cooperative learning (Smith, 1996) [2], many researchers draw a distinction. In an attempt to differentiate the two terms, Panitz (1996) [3] asserts that collaborative learning is "a personal philosophy" based on consensus building. Dillenbourg (1999) [4] adds that collaborative learning involves two or more people sharing responsibility, taking collective decisions and acting together in order to learn something together. However, cooperative learning is defined as the structure that usually requires a series of steps that helps people to achieve "a specific goal or develop an end product which is usually content specific" (Panitz, 1996) [5]. In collaborative learning the emphasis is on the process of working together while the achievement of the product is central to cooperative learning.

Collaborative learning epitomizes the social constructivist perspective on learning (Vygotsky, 1978) [6]. Vygotsky (1978) emphasises the importance of others, including teachers, as mediators of

learning. He claims that learning originates from internalising meaning during social interaction while using relevant 'scaffolding' within the 'Zone of Proximal Development'. The ultimate aim is for students to develop the ability to become independent learners (Knight & Yorke, 2003) [7]. Irrespective of the teaching approach adopted, collaboration among learners and/or between learners and the teacher in the classroom constitutes an integral element in language learning. In recent years, universities have stressed the value of "working with others" as a core skill required for employment. University College Dublin in its Strategic Plan for 2014 describes being "academically excellent with an aptitude for continued, self-directed and collaborative learning in academic and professional settings" as one of its key graduate attributes (UCD, 2010, p.14) [8].

This paper outlines the findings of a small study which examines the extent to which collaboration outside the classroom involves learners sharing responsibility and taking collective decisions to demonstrate speaking and listening skills in Spanish.

2. Context for the study

In 2005 under a new management team, University College Dublin underwent radical reform, both at structural and curriculum levels. The goal was to become more efficient and to align itself to the Bologna process. The major restructuring of faculties and academic departments was taken in parallel with an even greater curriculum reform of every programme within the university. While this process had its opponents and challenges could not be ignored, the new curriculum provided opportunities for learning that were previously absent. Some of the opportunities that are worth highlighting are:

- greater engagement of students in the learning process (learning outcomes);
- freedom for academics to introduce several assessment strategies;
- greater use of the Virtual Learning Environment (Blackboard).

Among the challenges faced were:

- fewer in-classroom teaching hours per module;
- how to develop ways of facilitating student self-directed learning outside the classroom.

In an effort to embrace the change, and the reduction in the number of teaching hours per week from four to two, an individual project was incorporated into Level 1 Spanish Language modules in 2006. Students were required to research a cultural topic related to the contents of the modules and submit the outcomes of their work in the form of a written portfolio at the end of the semester. As a means of preparing students for the introduction of self-directed learning at Level 2, an online survey of students who have completed Level 2 modules was undertaken in June 2010. Those students had experienced project work in Level 1 but not in Level 2. The study revealed that although some students thought it was hard work, most of them valued the project as a good activity that contributed to self-directed learning, to the development of research skills, as well as improving their reading and writing in

Spanish (Hernández, 2010) [9]. The findings of that study provided the platform for the development of self-directed learning outside the classroom in Level 2 language modules. As a result, a collaborative learning component was introduced during semester 2 of the last academic year 2010-11. This paper focuses on collaborative work carried out during semester 2 of the academic years 2010-11 and in the current year 2011-12.

In order to carry out the collaborative project, students were randomly placed in groups of 4 or 5 students. It was left to each group to organise themselves and agree on the method of working. The only compulsory element was that they had to report the work in progress four times during the semester using the group journal in the VLE. Each participant was rewarded with 5% of the total module marks if the four reports were submitted indicating that all members had contributed to the group work. At the end of the semester each group had to deliver an oral presentation in Spanish based on one of the topics that were part of the collaborative work done during semester 2 while in semester 1 they had to demonstrate the collaborative work done during the semester in an audiovisual test at the end of the semester. 25% of the total module marks was given to each student individually based on their performance on the audiovisual test (semester 1). 25% was also awarded to the oral group presentation (semester 2) where marks were allocated both for the group work and for individual performance using an assessment grid for each student. An action research study has been ongoing with the view to improve the learning experience of students of Spanish.

3. Methods and data collection

Data collected from an online anonymous student survey that the university makes available to students at the end of each semester have been used for this study. Although the survey does not focus specifically on students' views about collaborative work, the survey was regarded as an unbiased instrument to elicit students' views on collaborative learning in relation to their overall satisfaction with the Level 2 language modules. The survey consists of seven core questions, five of which are Likert-type and two are open-ended. Each module coordinator is allowed to add up to six extra questions to the survey.

This paper focuses on a qualitative analysis of the students' responses to two open-ended questions from the surveys completed by the students, although results from one Likert-type question will also be presented. The analysis examines comments made by students in relation to the project work. For the purpose of maintaining anonymity, the modules will not be identified and will be referred to as ModA and ModB (semester 2, 2010-11) and ModC (semester 1, 2011-12). Because data for semester 2 of the current year are not yet available (ModD and ModE), the analysis of collaborative work is based on students' views raised during staff-student meetings and in conversation between students and this year's module coordinators.

4. Results

The response rate for the surveys was 38.3%, 45% and 46.4% respectively for ModA, ModB and ModC. The response rate is in line with other modules across the university.

The two open-ended questions relevant for the present study were worded as follows:

Q6 "Identify up to three aspects of the module that most helped your learning"

Q7 "Suggest up to three changes to the module that would enhance your learning".

Group work and the project were identified as one of the aspects that most helped students' learning by all the respondents from ModB, by 30% of students from ModA and by 13.3% of students in ModC. Sample extracts are:

> "Project and final presentation helped for consolidating material learnt " (ModB)

> "Doing the oral work in groups was a good idea – at first I wasn't so sure but in the end, you end up speaking a lot more than you would if you'd done it alone" (ModA)

> "I found the online aspect of the module and the group work outside the class helpful" (ModC)

None of the respondents from ModB suggested the project or group work as something they would like to change in order to enhance their learning. Only one respondent (5.8%) from ModA suggested that there should be an individual oral exam and therefore did not agree with the collaborative work or the project leading to the group oral presentation. In ModC 17.5% of respondents expressed negative views against the collaborative work. Some quotations from the survey illustrate the students' views:

> "My group had difficulty making progress on it as we didn't know what we were meant to be doing" (ModC)

> "Group-work project was awkward to organise for a few marks" (ModC)

The only relevant Likert-type question in the survey for this study was:

> Q2 "The assessments were relevant to the work of this module"

71.4% of respondents from ModA, 100% from ModB and 66.7% of respondents from ModC expressed that they 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with that statement.

Preliminary results from data collected during meetings with students this semester regarding ModD and ModE indicate that there is strong support for collaborative work in ModE while a large number of students from ModD have expressed negative views regarding the collaborative project (Staff-student meetings).

5. Discussion and conclusions

A large number of respondents from ModB regarded collaborative work positively when compared with respondents from ModA and ModC. This result can be explained when we look at the type of students taking ModB as collaborative work is part of other modules in their programme. Arguably, they had the required skills for working with others. A significant factor influencing negative views about collaborative work for students doing ModC could have been the lower linguistic ability of a large number of them. That factor could have added more pressure on those students who struggled with the module as a whole. A knock on effect has been that the more competent students in ModD are disillusioned with group work as they feel they can achieve better results working on their own.

The lower percentage of respondents in 2011-12, when compared to 2010-11, who 'strongly agree' or 'agree' with the assessment strategies used in the language modules could be interpreted as respondents not being happy with collaborative work as part of the assessment of the language modules. As the statement refers to all assessment strategies used in the module it cannot be concluded that respondents were specifically referring to the collaborative work when they answered that question.

While these findings are preliminary, it appears that students need to see the intrinsic value of learning with others. From the outset, students need to understand that collaborative work requires time and effort. They need to take responsibility for their own learning, which involves agreeing to take on different roles as part of the collaborative work, and planning and managing the group work from the start. Turning groups into effective collaborative teams may require 'scaffolding' from the teachers so that they can support the students in achieving that goal. Several steps would have to be followed to ensure not only that the groups meet or submit the required entries in the group learning journals but that the process of working together leads to greater competence in using and understanding the Spanish language.

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