

Collaboration in the Age of Personalised Mass(ive) Education

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Abstract: In the paper we explore a number of issues we believe challenge some current notions of collaboration. We explore tensions arising from the increased interest in personalised open learning, and how this challenges, but also offers new ways of conceptualising collaboration towards group-organisations that are more nomadic entanglements of shifting participation.

Keywords: pedagogy, collaborative learning, nomadic entanglements, individualisation

Introduction

In this poster we explore what we see as challenges to the notion of collaboration as it has often been conceived within CSCL, and more generally within some strands of online open learning. The notion of collaboration we refer to is that which has focused primarily on closely-tied types of collaboration (Stahl et al. 2006a). We believe that there are two main challenges to such notions of collaborative learning. The first stems from the rising interest in personalized learning and the notion of the self-directed, self-programmed autonomous student. This can be seen as a wider educational and political challenge to collaborative pedagogies. Secondly, we find that there might be a need to conceptualise collaborative learning from a perspective where collaboration in small-groups or teams is transitioning from that of a stable or familial group to one of changing or nomadic groups.

The structure and characteristics of groups in today's digital world

Stahl et al. (2006b) suggested that CSCL requires a focus on the meaning-making practices of collaborating groups and on the design of technological artifacts to mediate interaction, rather than a focus on individual learning. Further Stahl et al. (2014) point out the dialogical perspective provides an important theoretical framework for CSCL. However as they also remind us measuring the effectiveness of dialogue or collaboration, even in small collaborative groups, is not a straightforward affair and efforts to support dialogic collaboration remains an on-going challenge in CSCL. We believe the rising interest in personalized learning and the notion of the self-directed, self-programmed autonomous student can be seen as an even wider educational and political challenge to CSCL research and collaborative pedagogies.

The present day online learning landscape is providing learners with a myriad of different and contradictory material conditions and learning spaces that offer a potentially confusing array of opportunities, challenges and issues that sits between a broadcast and discussion view of online learning. What Weller (2007) terms the broadcast view of open learning could be described as that which includes a focus on personalized and individualised learning, self-paced materials (learning objects, OERs), flexible learning, learning on demand and student as consumer or a self-programmed learner; an approach that offers wide, flexible access to materials and/or self-paced activities. This, in a positive reading, as a means of providing access to education for the widest possible group of people, but in a more critical reading can also be associated with austerity politics and as a means to reduce costs or privatise education (Jones, 2014). In contrast, what Weller terms the discussion view is about collaboration, dialogue and critical inquiry with peers and with tutors, in supportive and facilitated online environments or learning spaces. There is a greater expectation of interdependence, co-learning and social sharing of the responsibility for learning.

The recent emergence of personalized or individualized learning, where the individual is not 'held back' by collaboration, but can roam freely around in the open education market raises we believe some interesting issues. While this particular notion of open learning is not new, MOOCs, obviously, have pushed these concerns to the foreground. Where the student is more likely to be viewed as consumer or self-programmed learner; choosing to take MOOCs or join a P2PU (Peer to Peer University) course or other online communities. The format oriented towards providing wide, flexible access to materials and/or self-paced activities as a way of providing access to education for the widest possible group of people. Arguably, fulfilling some of the aspirations of Illich's (1971) vision of Deschooling Society but not others! Illich's vision was towards learning webs that democratized knowledge and the co-education of society in ways that retained the importance and relevance of dialogue and critical inquiry. His was not a vision of simply making educational artefacts and resources more freely available between people to satisfy their personal learning and individualized interests or

objectives. In addition, as Ponti (2013) comments in her discussion of P2PU, while the ever-growing body of resources provides opportunities for learners to access and increase their knowledge, this provision can also be overwhelming, particularly for the inexperienced learner entering a new area, knowledge community or domain for the first time. Interestingly, what has come to be known as cMOOCs are often foregrounded as building on more social and interactional premises than the later xMOOCs. However, connectivist principles as explored by Anderson & Dron (2010) stress autonomy and the importance of personalised networks over more strongly-tied groups and collaboration (Ryberg, Buus, & Georgsen, 2012). Plus often suffer from inexperienced learners finding the online format chaotic and overwhelming.

Novel and Emerging forms of Collaboration

On the other hand, it has been argued that the networked and weakly tied organization of learning groups or personal networks can be a powerful means of learning that offers serendipity, autonomy, flexibility, independence, ephemerality, and spontaneity (Anderson & Dron, 2010). Further, that these are dynamics that we might overlook if focusing too much on the strongly-tied collaboration within groups, rather than exploring how these might benefit from the weakly-tied traversing of personal learning networks (Jones et al., 2006, Ryberg et al., 2012). Engeström (2008) suggests that learning and collaboration in work teams, more broadly, are under transformation, as they are becoming less stable entities that are characterised instead by fluctuating membership, shifting foci and tasks – what he terms knotworking. We could equally view it as ‘nomadic entanglements’ where project work, group work or work teams are not fixed entities, but rather knots connecting lines, traces or paths, and coming together in certain places over time to accomplish common tasks and then disperse again. As such we might be seeing the contours of small-group work changing, where there are continuous shifts in membership, but also in the intensity of the work e.g. with periods of intense collaboration and inwards orientation, but also periods of dispersion and outwards movements. Thus we could speak of pulsations between collaboration and more loosely-tied organisations of the work, however, with fierce interdependence becoming a necessary condition to complete the work and to gain new knowledge and learning.

We are wondering whether these pulsations and transitions between different collaborative orchestrations have to date received too little attention from the perspective of the issues identified and explored in the CSCL community and similar areas of research. For example are we paying sufficient attention to the dynamics or influences upon these nomadic entanglements and temporary “coming together” to learn and create new knowledge? Do we know and understand if this changes our current understanding and ideas about collaborative group work?

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