THE DESIGN OF EFFECTIVE ONLINE COLLABORATIVE WRITING TASKS: LESSONS LEARNED AT A JAPANESE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

The authors will share their insights on the design and administration of some wiki based collaborative writing tasks which form part of four fully-online EFL (English as a foreign language) courses at a Japanese university. The courses use the Moodle LMS and have approximately 500 students majoring in computer science and design. Using themes from the students’ first and second year courses, the principal goals of the writing tasks, in addition to improving writing skills, are to develop interpersonal, communication and teamwork skills. An action research project has been implemented in an effort to gauge the effectiveness of and improve the writing tasks as a whole. Students reported appreciating the collaborative nature of the writing tasks, and saw them as a chance to write something meaningful, improve communication skills and learn from each other. However, we observed a reduction of participation in the writing tasks, especially towards the end of the students' second academic year. Surveys indicate that some students disliked the extra demands on their time that collaboration requires, uncooperative group members and the perceived threat of free riders. We will describe the evolution in the writing tasks that has been instigated by students’ feedback and our observations.

Introduction

One of the benefits of e-learning is that it facilitates collaborative learning (CL) (Storch, 2011). In particular, wikis are argued to be especially suited to getting students to work together on the co-construction of text and knowledge (West & West, 2009). This paper describes the design and evolution of some wiki based collaborative writing tasks which form part of a fully online English language course at a Japanese university. The course, called the Virtual English Program (VEP), is taken by 500 first and second year computer science and design students and went online in April 2010.

Background

The recognition of the importance and value of cooperation and collaboration in the activity of learning is well documented and predates the Internet. Bruffee (1984), in a defence of the accusation that CL is the blind leading the blind, wrote that learning is a social process, and that therefore, “To learn is to work collaboratively to establish and maintain knowledge among a community of knowledgeable peers through the process that Richard Rorty calls ‘socially justifying belief’” (p. 646).

Slavin (1991) praises the virtues of cooperative learning strategies "for improving such diverse outcomes as student achievement at a variety of grade levels and in many subjects, intergroup relations, relationships between mainstreamed and normal-progress students, and student self esteem” (p. 81). These plaudits are echoed by Walker (1997) who describes the use of collaborative learning in a college mathematics course. He claims that CL reduced dropout rates, improved test scores, motivated students and enabled them to cover 20% more material during the term. Not only can students' academic performance be improved, CL also has a humanising capacity to enhance social skills (West & West, 2009) and a facility to encourage students to see things from others' perspectives (Rau & Heyl, 1990; Anderson, 2008).

The Internet and the possibilities of networking amongst dispersed groups of learners intensified the dynamics and broadened the scope of collaborative learning. Indeed, for Palloff & Pratt (2004), collaboration is seen as the "heart and soul" (p. 6) of online courses. This, they maintain, is especially
the case with courses based on constructivist pedagogy. Thus, the development of communities of practice, similar to but not entirely the same as virtual learning communities (VLCs) and distributed communities of practice (DCoPs), have become central to the concept of CL (Schwier, 2008). It is claimed that individuals in learning communities "both support and challenge each other leading to effective and relevant knowledge construction" (Anderson, 2008, p. 51). Palloff and Pratt (2007) describe how, in the context of university online courses, the community can be extended beyond the classroom, an important assertion given that education in Japanese universities is primarily classroom bound.

In the field of language education, the advantages of CL have also been recognised. Nunan (1993) notes that studies have shown that students working in groups outperformed those working on their own in standardized language tests. He also suggests that CL is particularly suited to language acquisition since students need to negotiate meaning among themselves to complete an activity. Swain (2010) refers to this negotiation stage as “languaging”; a process in which language learners discuss what language will best communicate their intended meaning.

One of many publishing tools available to students is the wiki. Developed by Ward Cunningham in 1995, a wiki can be simply defined as a web page or site that multiple users can modify (Cummings & Barton, 2009). They have been extensively used in language teaching, and various studies have demonstrated that they can lead to positive outcomes vis-à-vis students' language acquisition (Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010; Storch, 2011).

CL is not without its detractors (Ferreday & Hodgson, 2008). Randall (1999) writes about the dangers of making students responsible for each other's learning. In other words, an unfair burden may be placed on those students with stronger language skills. Rau and Heyl (1990) warn against the dangers of “self-servers ... sponging off the honest toil of others, an insidious injustice that saps collective morale and undermines norms of reciprocity and cooperation” (p. 147). Strauss (2001) focuses on problems associated with assessing groups, in particular the integrity of marks gained from collaborative tasks.

**VEP Background**

**Context**

The university where this study takes place, like most in Japan, has yet to embrace the Internet and networks for educational purposes to the extent that its European, North American and other Asian counterparts have done (Latchem et al., 2008). It does not have any central coordination of online learning, nor any policy prescribing the use of networked technologies. However, the technical requirements for technology enhanced learning are in place: all 1,100 students own a laptop which can access the Internet from anywhere in the university and all instructors have access to a Moodle LMS.

The VEP is the university’s first large-scale online learning project. It is an online English language-learning course for all first and second year students. It was originally created in 2002 as an offline course. However due to numerous problems with the course, it was completely overhauled and came online in 2010. The primary goals of this new VEP are to improve students' English listening, writing and reading skills, and enhance their vocabulary knowledge. The authors are the designers, administrators and supervisors of the program.

Two 15-week VEP courses run concurrently each semester: one each for first and second year students. Only three supervisors are responsible for offering face-to-face and email support to the approximately 500 students taking the courses.

**Students**

The five defining characteristics of the VEP students are:
most have low level English language skills (false-beginners);
most are not highly motivated to study English;
most have no experience with graded collaborative assignments;
most have no experience with e-learning; and
they are computer science or design majors.

Of particular concern when designing the course were the students’ relatively low level of English, their lack of motivation and the absence of scheduled classroom support. The literature suggests that small groups of motivated, high level students are better suited to online collaborative learning (OCL) than the type of cohort that is the focus of this study.

A concomitant issue is that this cohort of low-level students contains various sub-groups of motivation and level. The authors are aware that when placed in groups of three or four in face-to-face classroom situations, groups tend to take on one or more of the following three attributes:

- free riding: one student contributes little, if at all, but receives the mark given to their group;
- division of labour: students with the best English skills end up doing all the English work, while others focus on other aspects of the task; and
- minimal coordination: each group member completes a certain section of the task, but makes very little attempt to link the parts together into a coherent whole.

Rationale for the Writing Tasks

Given the above constraints, it would seem that the decision to incorporate collaborative tasks might not have been wise. Nevertheless, there were four reasons to include writing tasks, and particularly online collaborative writing tasks, into the VEP. First, the unit tasks concentrate on the acquisition of listening and reading skills, so writing tasks were included to introduce an element of language output. Second, the potential benefits of CL for the students are considerable. A third reason for the implementation of OCL activities was that discussions with faculty members holding ‘management’ positions about the viability and nature of e-learning had revealed that virtually none had been aware of the possibilities of networked learning beyond online quizzes and distributing material. This project is thus an opportunity to demonstrate to them the possibilities of OCL. Finally, time constraints would have precluded the VEP supervisors from grading more than two individually written compositions per semester. The creation of groups enabled the setting of a larger number of writing tasks.

The VEP Writing Tasks

Each VEP course includes four writing tasks, one every three to five weeks, which account for 20% of the overall grade. VEP 1 students write a paragraph of 150 to 200 words; thereafter they write an essay of between 200 to 350 words. Students report spending just over two hours on each task; a total of ten hours per semester.

Set-up in 2010

All students were randomly assigned to groups of three for each writing task. A link at the end of each VEP unit directed students to a wiki, which could be seen by all students but edited only by group members. It also contained instructions for completing the writing task and a list of available topics, all in English. There were no restrictions on how students contacted each other or carried out their work. After the deadline, the assignments were graded using Moodle’s standard ‘offline assignment’ module. Students in each group were assigned an integral grade out of twenty, given some written feedback and sent a system-generated email, which contained a link to this information.

Issues with the online collaborative writing tasks

At the end of each academic year, students were invited to share their thoughts about the writing tasks in a survey and focus groups (Figures 1 and 2). Students identified learning opportunities and
interactional possibilities as positive aspects. Naturally, students also had complaints. Some issues from the first two years are presented below, in a list inspired by Roberts and McKinnerny’s (2007) review of problems associated with OCL.

**Figure 1:** Positive survey feedback breakdown for 2010 and 2011 1st year students

**Figure 2:** Negative survey feedback breakdown for 2010 and 2011 1st year students
1. Student antipathy towards group work

There was considerable but not universal antipathy towards group work. To the question “What problems did the Writing Tasks have?”, 80% (n=111) and 72% (n=104) of 1st year survey respondents in 2010 and 2011 respectively mentioned some aspect of having to work in groups (e.g. communication problems, lack of coordination) (Figure 2). Although, conversely, 30% (n=93) of these same students also wrote that working in groups was a good aspect of the writing tasks. Importantly, there were differences between student levels. Only 20% (n=15) of the top quartile of students (as measured by TOEIC Bridge scores) who responded wrote something positive about having to work in groups compared with 41% (n=33) of those from the bottom quartile.

2. Group size

The decision to create groups of three was based on a desire to minimise the complexity of communication and decisionmaking while maintaining a group environment. No problems have been raised regarding this choice of group size.

3. Group work skills

Nineteen percent of students (n=55) specifically highlighted a lack of communication between group members as being a bad aspect of the writing tasks. Furthermore, focus groups with students revealed that there was a tendency towards division of labour and minimal coordination. In other words, even when students contributed equal amounts of time, some students did not produce any English, and even if they did, their minimal coordination meant that these students cooperated more than they collaborated.

4. Free Riders

Recognition of participation is based on an honour system, and some progress has been made in addressing issues with free riders. Initially, students were instructed, in English, to write their name below their group’s composition to claim a grade only if they had made a fair contribution. While students received a bonus point for each group member who did not contribute to their writing task, this overall system did not sufficiently deter free riders and this caused dissatisfaction amongst some contributing students. That said, only 3% (n=8) specifically reported free-riding as being a problem in 2010 and 2011.

5. Inequalities of student abilities

In the initial design, group members were reassigned each writing task, resulting in each student collaborating in sixteen different groups over the two years, potentially rounding out random differences. This arrangement favours lower level students in that they stand to get a better grade than if they were left to their own devices or in homogeneous groups. Indeed, analysis of the writing task results suggests that lower level students received higher scores than if they had collaborated with other lower level students. However, higher level students received only slightly lower scores than if they been with higher level students only. Scores reflect just one aspect of collaboration: higher level students can benefit from teaching what they know, and lower level students potentially can learn from their peers.

6. The withdrawal of group members

Groups are finalised at the beginning of each course on the assumption that all students will participate in the writing tasks. The withdrawal of a student significantly alters the group dynamic and can cause stress if the other members are not informed. This became an issue among second year students doing their final VEP course in 2011, with withdrawal rates of between 35% and 77% (n=236) among the four writing tasks. Students may have chosen to skip a writing task because of previous bad experiences, or because they realised that they did not need to do it in order to pass the course; they
were not compulsory.

7. The assessment of individuals within the groups

Students who claimed a contribution to the writing task were given the group’s grade, with no recognition of individual effort. No students have specifically complained about this system.

8. Other issues

While the seven points above relate to online collaborative learning, they do not fully cover the scope of this paper. There were two other significant issues relating specifically to online collaborative writing tasks. First, plagiarism and machine translation. While plagiarism is occasionally identified, awareness of the ‘zero tolerance’ policy seems to have spread effectively through the students. Although it is unrealistic to control the use of translation software, unnatural or unclear writing is penalised. Secondly, there were some complaints that the writing task topics were unclear or too difficult and it was obvious that some groups did not know the correct format of an essay.

Changes

Informed by student feedback and supervisor observations, a number of changes have been implemented in the past two years to improve the writing task system. Numbers in square brackets refer to the related issues in the list above.

October 2010

- Some students complained about the difficulty of the topics, and it was obvious from some compositions that they had been misunderstood. A concerted effort was made to provide topics that were clear, unambiguous and recognise that group members have differing ideas. They are also more prescriptive. For example ‘The advantages of learning English’ could be modified to ‘What are three advantages or disadvantages for Japanese university students of learning English?’ [1, 8]
- Students were encouraged to share their past feedback with their new group. Initially, this meant navigating to each writing task page individually; however, links to each previous writing task’s feedback were added to the wiki. [3]
- A declaration, in Japanese, clearly instructing only those students who had made a fair contribution to the writing task to sign their name and claim credit for the group’s work was added to each wiki. This had an additional effect of increasing awareness of freeriding among students. [1, 3, 5]
- A grading rubric, in English and Japanese, was made available, and is also included in the students’ grade summary. The rubric has been significantly modified in 2012 in the hope that it helps students to understand what is expected of their composition. [1]

April 2011

- A comprehensive set of resources was made available to students, in Japanese, giving clear instructions related to writing and collaboration issues such as plagiarism, translation software, good communication, and group work etiquette. [3, 7, 5]
- A forum called the ‘Writing Task Meeting Place’ was created. It is a private environment for asynchronous communication. Almost none of the second year groups used it, however some 30% of first year groups used the forum to plan their compositions. [3]
- The ‘offline assignment’ grading module was replaced by a custom designed module called Feedback+. Among many other functions, it facilitates grading to a rubric, allocation of feedback to groups, notification of grades and feedback to students, and post-grading analysis. [1, 8]

October 2011

- Feedback+ was redesigned with enhanced features and improved performance. [1, 8]
April 2012

- Students were asked to consider and note their roles within their writing task groups. This activity had no bearing on grades and it is hoped that it leads to an appreciation of the various tasks that group work entails and intragroup recognition of individual contributions. The list includes:
  - Initiator of collaboration
  - Brainstormer
  - Outliner
  - Teacher
  - Learner
  - Data Collector
  - Text Editor
  - Spelling and Grammar Checker
  - Final Submitter [4, 6, 7]
- Initially, students were assigned to four groups each VEP course, however many complained that the constant effort of contacting and negotiating with new group members was onerous and unsettling. The fourth writing task of each course has been turned into a rewrite of the first writing task, to be conducted by the original group. This enables students to use the feedback they received for the first writing task and is an opportunity to improve the quality of previous work. [1, 3, 6]

Conclusion

When designing online collaborative writing tasks for such a large group of students with limited supervision, the authors identified a number of important considerations. Firstly, writing task topics must not be open to misinterpretation. Second, students’ group work and technology skills must be considered. When possible, tasks or information that focus on or encourage skill building in these areas should be incorporated into the system. Third, an efficient grading system that can handle groups and rubric-based feedback saves valuable teacher time while simultaneously provides students with important feedback that can be utilized to improve their future writing tasks. Fourth, supervisors need to evaluate student feedback as it is a valuable consideration when fine-tuning the course design.

Perhaps the salient point of the project is that in spite of various conditions which would seem to preclude its success, such as a lack of official support for OCL in the institution, unmotivated students who are not interested in English, have sparse technology skills and little experience with collaboration, and an inability to provide adequate supervision, the writing tasks have been successful. That is, the students have been able to work together and produce written compositions.

However, it could be argued that these tasks are not, strictly speaking, pure OCL, for two reasons. Firstly, perhaps they are better described as hybrid OCL in that although many elements of the tasks were online, much of the interaction between students was offline. The online communication tools were often used to arrange meetings rather than as a space to work online. The other point is a product of the students’ nascent group work skills. The authors’ observations of collaboration in the classroom suggest that there are elements of cooperation involved, as well as collaboration.

Both the quantitative and qualitative data provide useful insights into the effectiveness of the collaborative writing tasks. At the very least, at a practical level the collaborative tasks are ‘working’ in as much as the students have adapted to the need of working in groups to produce the short essays as required, despite the minimal supervision and guidance, and their limited experience of OCL. Furthermore, notwithstanding their dislike of the inconveniences associated with group work, they appear to welcome the opportunity to work with and meet students from other classes. Future efforts to improve the design of these online collaborative writing tasks will involve further attempts to facilitate online communication and collaboration, coupled with greater efforts to move from disjunctive tasks, in which the group performance is primarily a measure of the most capable student,
to additive tasks, in which the contributions of all members are reflected as much as possible in the final assessment (Salomon & Globerson, 1989, p. 94).

References


