

Chapter 10

Effectively Utilizing a Socially Mediated Network: Facilitating Meaningful Collaboration Among Pre-Service Student-Teachers and University EFL Students

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ABSTRACT

Cooperative learning has evolved over the years to include web-mediated elements within traditional and virtual classrooms. In this chapter, authors discuss a collaboration that used computer-supported collaborative learning through an online socially-mediated network. This collaboration served as a bridge between two universities from different countries. Not only did this collaboration link the students from each university together, but it provided language learners and pre-service student-teachers with the ability to benefit from the unique connection between them (i.e. students needing to learn language and teachers needing to practice teaching a language). Authors discuss the collaboration, the framework, and the format of this cooperative learning project. Much of this discussion is rooted in the experiences of some of the students who participated in its evolution with the intent to provide a direction for implementing such a type of collaboration in other institutions.

INTRODUCTION

What do trilingual Mexican university students in a rural area have in common with pre-service student-teachers at an urban university in the United States? Both groups utilized a socially-mediated network to create a learning space designed to facilitate the attainment of their academic goals. The students in Mexico needed to practice and develop their English language skills (especially in developing cultural competence and conversational abilities), while the U.S. students needed to interact with and develop strategies for teaching English language learners. As this particular case highlights, collaborations can easily exist in virtual spaces through any number of available platforms.

Collaborations can also serve as a bridge between universities from around the world. While there are many types of virtual outlets, the availability of socially-mediated networks have made collaborations an integral part of daily life for many (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, Snapchat, Twitter, VK, WeChat, etc.). Students, faculty, and administrators often turn to socially-mediated networks in their personal and professional lives for many reasons (Sykes, Holden, & Knight, 2019). As Langhorst (2009) noted, people tend to gravitate toward virtual networks. In this way, a socially-mediated network could be an appropriate choice as a bridge between universities because many educators and learners appear to have a preference for such collaboration simply because of its virtual nature. These virtual networks can also serve to link language learners while allowing for the practice of language skills (De Felice, 2012, 2013). Additionally, these virtual networks provide an opportunity to have meaningful and more authentic experiences for students from rural areas who are learning a foreign language they cannot or only infrequently encounter in their local communities.

The underlying assumption for creating a university-bridged collaboration is that such an arrangement would support the educators' and students' needs while providing an inexpensive, yet expansive learning space. Taking advantage of various platforms, applications, and programs, these collaborative environments can be structured to include any number of components that take into account the needs of today's language classroom (Ioannou & Stylianou-Georgiou, 2012; Rojano-Caceres, Ramos-Quintana, & Vargas-Cerdán, 2012). First, students can be engaged in learning while being around the platforms within a face-to-face environment (many times, educators can work with their students in laboratories or classrooms at their universities). Second, educators and students can work in/through their network while being at a distance from each other. In this manner, the platform can act as a mediator for connecting the geographically distinct entities and may serve as an anchor for this type of cooperative environment. Third, given the advances in software development, the platform can act as a 'member' in a cooperative group. This membership can be in the form of a quiz maker, an application where the learner interacts with a specific component or a space for uploading content, among others. Lastly, the collaboration can serve higher purposes for the educators and language learners, especially in terms of learning a language (De Felice, 2012).

BACKGROUND

Socially-Mediated Networks

The use of socially-mediated networks can enhance instruction, establish deeper relationships with students, and/or substitute for a learning management system (Carter, Foulger, & Ewbank, 2008; Cruickshank,

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