

Chapter 7.6

Teaching Dimension in Web-Based Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

The article tackles the issue of the teaching dimension in computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) contexts. In particular, it describes two Web-based courses that were held in 2006—one by the Istituto Tecnologie Didattiche – CNR and one by the University of Genoa, which, while sharing the socioconstructivist theoretical framework, adopt different approaches as far as the teaching dimension is concerned: While in the former course tutors were asked to cover all the functions typically required by e-tutors, in the latter, experience functions were distributed across a variety of actors. The aim of the work is to foster reflections about strong points and weaknesses of the two approaches, thus leading to considerations concerning the applicability of the models even in contexts different from the original ones.

INTRODUCTION

As it is well known, the use of telematics in the learning processes brings about radical changes in the educational context in that it allows students to interact with peers independently from any spatial or temporal constraint. CSCL (computer-supported collaborative learning) is a very challenging research field investigating how collaborative processes carried out in online contexts may lead to the construction of new knowledge and thus to learning (Cognition and Technology Group at Vanderbilt, 1991; Dillenbourg, 1999; Kanuka & Anderson, 1999; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994).

In this context, several studies have been devoted to the tutor's role, which is seen as a key factor for fostering an effective collaborative learning process. In this article, we address the teaching dimension, a more general concept con-

cerning not only the tutoring function, but rather all the initiatives and actions undertaken during a course with the aim of supporting collaboration and learning processes of the learning community. The concept is wide in that it may refer to actions and behaviours by any actor involved in the learning community, including students. In particular, the work aims at comparing two courses while sharing the socioconstructivist theoretical framework, adopted different approaches as far as the teaching dimension is concerned. Thus, the article describes the different choices and reflects on strong points and weaknesses of the two approaches.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In CSCL contexts, one of the basic assumptions is that discussion and negotiation among students may play a key role in the learning process because, while interacting and sharing their points of view, students develop their critical thinking and thus gain a better understanding of things. Thus, in order to allow and enhance interactions among students and between students and tutors, the actors of the learning experience should not act just as individuals, but rather they should feel like part of a community. Shaffer and Anundsen (1993) define a *community* as a dynamic whole that emerges when a group of people share common practices, are interdependent, make decisions jointly, identify themselves with something larger than the sum of their individual relationships, and make a long-term commitment to well-being (their own, one another's, and the group's). From this perspective, a *learning community*, that is to say, a community that has been set up with learning purposes, makes no exception, and it is up to designers and tutors to set up the learning environment in such a way that the community can “form, storm, norm, perform and finally adjourn” (Tuckman, 1965).

A Web-based learning community is characterized by its size (the number of people involved), the general features of learners (background, technical skills, age, gender, etc.), the roles members play, and the social structures employed in the various learning phases, which are usually coupled with the learning strategies adopted (Pozzi & Persico, 2006). All these characteristics have to be defined by designers according to the context and the learning goals, and are afterward managed by tutors and teachers during the course in such a way that students achieve the learning objectives.

As a matter of fact, within CSCL contexts, the role of the tutor has always been recognized as being determinant. Even if nowadays it is more and more frequent to talk about *human support*—a general expression stressing the fact that support in CSCL may come from the various members of the learning community (other students, experts, technicians, etc.; Lund, 2004)—it is undeniable that tutors have a primary role in supporting the learning process in all its dimensions.

In 1995, Berge enlighteningly identified four main functions of the online tutor: the social, the pedagogical, the managerial, and the technical functions. Similarly, Paulsen (1995) and Mason (1991) spoke about organizational, social, and intellectual roles.

More recently, Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) defined what they call “teaching presence” in terms of “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (p. 5). The teaching dimension thus entails *design* and *organizational aspects*, *discourse facilitation*, and *direct instruction* (Anderson et al.).

A tutor taking care of *design and organizational* matters creates working groups, assigns roles for carrying out the activities, identifies leaders, suggests the time schedule, and so forth. In order to carry out such functions, the tutor should be able to evaluate students' individual

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