COLLABORATIVE LEARNING FOR A LARGE COHORT OF STUDENTS: IS INFORMAL LEARNING SPACE A VIABLE OPTION?

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Abstract

In the quest to assiduously work towards achieving student-centred teaching and learning, there is a need to re-look at the existing learning spaces, formal and informal. It is common in most universities to find the formal learning spaces arranged with tables and chairs facing the whiteboard, signalling a preference for the didactic approach. Therefore, to accommodate the pedagogic paradigm shift towards active learning, a re-design of the formal learning spaces is required, with a slant towards more informal learning spaces, as they are the nexus between learning and pedagogy. This is because learning has become more informal, social and less structured.

According to Hakkinen and Jarvela (2006), high-level collaboration among students in real-life learning settings is difficult to realise. There may be considerable inter-mental activities and group cognition in one team, while it is seriously lacking in another. Hence, it is important to find out what makes some interactions and environments successful, and under which circumstances, but not others. This study will explore the following research questions: What is the interaction between individual and social dimensions of collaboration in informal learning spaces? How are the individual and group-level learning activities intertwined in informal learning spaces resulting in productive collaboration and learning? What are the supports and barriers for productive learning activities in the informal learning spaces?

A case study approach is considered given the need for an in-depth comprehension of the collaborative learning in its real-life context. The research design employs a single case study with multiple embedded units of analysis, that is, different study groups. The researcher works closely with the participating lecturers in the design of learning activities suitable for collaborative learning in the informal spaces. All the learning outcomes which are normally taught in the classroom are now incorporated into the learning activities, and through collaborative learning in the informal spaces, students will attain these outcomes.

The data collection is comprised of video recordings and video-stimulated cued retrospective semi-structured interviews (Van Gog, Pass, Van Merrienboer & Witte, 2005) as well as informal conversation with students. The video recordings will capture each group face-to-face collaborative learning sessions. The informal conversation is to feed data to design the semi-structured interview questions concentrating on the ways students used the informal learning spaces and how they are engaged in collaborative learning.

During the semi-structured interviews, students are asked to describe how their group collaborates in learning, challenges within the group and how they dealt with the challenges, and the learning environments (physical, electronic, virtual and human interference) in the informal spaces. After the first round of interview, students are shown three video clips (length 2 – 3 minutes) specifically chosen by the researchers to represent what occurs just prior to, during and just after the emergence of challenges and collaboration of learning within the group. Subsequently, they are requested to report retrospectively what happens in the group, how they collaborate, and how they try to solve the challenges.

Keywords: Collaborative learning, informal learning spaces, large cohort.