

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING IN THE FINNISH EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM: BRAZILIAN TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses the model of social-constructivism employed in the Finnish education system and the learning methods, based on the social construction of knowledge. The aim of this work is to show the collaboration as a methodological strategy for learning and the main aspects of collaborative learning of the Finnish education system. The methodology used was based on the Brazilian teachers' observations in different learning environments, based on semi-structured interviews in different educational levels. Based on the partial results, the collaboration is used as a teacher's strategy, involving students' autonomy and participation on the learning process. Collaborative learning in Finland is based on the process-perspective, since it works better when communication and verbal reflection between students happens, producing a better interaction, more social connection and creative engagement during activities.

Key Words: Collaborative Learning; Social-Constructivism; Finnish Education System.

INTRODUCTION

The social-constructivist model discusses the learning methods from the teachers' experiences in the world; therefore, for this theoretical view, learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon. According to Freire (2006), it is impractical to think that all person has to learn and to be "built" individually, without the aid of others (Freire, 1996).

Collaborative learning in the educational environment has specific goals and objectives, among which are the promotion of cognitive and social development group, stimulating critical thinking, discussions and reflections of students, the use of the lifelong learning idea, increased self-esteem, affectivity and motivation of students for educational activities Otsuka (1999). Collaboration can also be seen as a methodology for learning as highlighted by Bruffe (1993) that addressed collaboration as a strategy for teacher use in the classroom, where this would involve the students' autonomy and participation of all those involved in learning process.

Based on this, the aim of this paper is to contribute with Brazilian teacher's perspectives of the collaborative learning in the Finnish educational system both based on the observed methods used in Finnish classes and on questionnaires applied to the International Business bachelor degree course at Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) in Tampere/Finland.

METHODS USED IN FINNISH CLASSES TO DEVELOP COLLABORATIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

As part of the process of understanding collaborative learning, more than 60 different kinds of classes were observed and described. These classes contemplated different fields of knowledge such as: music, languages engineering, arts, business, computer science, etc. They also contemplate different level of studies such as: vocational schools upper-secondary schools, under-graduation students, master classes and also some classes in a vocational school for special needs. Although most of the classes observed were presential, some online courses and classes were also observed and are part of this analysis

The focus on all these observations was to see if collaborative learning was been applied in all courses and classes and how it was applied into class. In addition to that, whenever collaborative learning was used, the methodology involving this concept was described and analyzed so that some of the methods and materials used in Finnish class to create/establish a collaborative environment among students were more could be better described and, in the future, applied in different realities. In this section, some of these strategies will be described and discussed.

Blogs and social media

One of the materials used by teachers to get to know students better and motivate themselves to know each other better is the blog. In many classes and in informal conversations, teachers and students referred to it as the best way of getting to know students' hobbies, talents, different interests and personalities. Due to that, dividing students in groups with different abilities and interests was easier. In their personal blogs, students could write descriptions about themselves and what they wish to learn and achieve in a specific course. The students can also share useful ideas and research material that they did. Assessments can also be posted in this blog as a way of sharing them with the other colleagues. In many cases, the course itself had a blog in which teacher shared the material that considered interesting and the tasks he/she expects students to do. It is a very fast way of communication with students and also a way of keeping documents and ideas in a single place, under labels that helps future use of the information posted there, as well as from the comments done by others over a certain topic.

Social Medias, such as Facebook, Twitter and others are also a very common tool used in class. In many of the classes observed, students had their groups closed community on Facebook in which they shared their tasks, projects and specially their doubts and questions. In this space, groups had a very strong and active interaction commenting on each other's tasks, production and solving problems.

Group work

Together with blog writing, group work were the two most used strategies to create collaborative learning among students. In most of the courses, after students know each other's characteristics and abilities, they divide themselves into groups that will be the same during all term. In many classes, teacher, after a brief explanation about the topic of the class, gives to the groups a specific task that can be the same for all groups or personalized for each group, depending on the topic of the class. Students have a limited period to develop their task and, will present it in the end of the class. Some of the tasks observed were related to the development of a researching strategy, discussing and solving some cases and even producing a small research during class, for instance. All of them developed by students without teacher's interference.

This kind of approach is centered in students' needs and helps creating a collaborative environment, once students know each other in a deeper way, which helps improving trust and motivates students to use their talents in benefit of the group. In this sense, collaborative environments transforms learning in a space in which failures and difficulties are less important than qualities. All students can contribute with the work in the

best way possible. In this sense, difficulties can be solved with others students help in the exchange of experience and knowledge among them. Each one in the group has a different and important role that is related to his/her abilities. Due to that, in each task all group has to work together using their best qualities and keeping a team spirit to accomplish them. Teachers, in this sense, would be their coaches guiding the work and helping them solving conflicts and struggling moments during projects. In this context, learning is not a teacher's responsibility anymore, but it is a group task.

Learning Cafe and Aquarium

Both this activities are very popular and were present in at least 7 of the 60 classes observed. Both of them are alternatives for the established group work.

Learning Cafe consists in station in which one student plays the mediator of the discussion. In each station, there is a statement or a different activity to be discussed with other students. All the students, apart from the mediators, are divided in groups and should discuss with the mediator about the topic and, later on, the group will move on to the next mediator and discuss the next topic. The mediator should stay in the same place and whenever he receives another group he/she should summarize what was discussed in the group(s) before and encourage the new group to (dis)agree with what was said before. All the ideas that the group come up with should be written down in a poster that will be presented to the class by the mediator. This strategy helps students to create, in a collaborate environment, a web of ideas that can later be related in such a way that they can build arguments to sustain or to go against the ideas that were presented. Other possibility for this activity is its online version. Each group of students would have to talk and discuss about a certain aspect of a theory or statement. All the ideas should be placed in an online document, in a shared online platform, like Google Drive, for example. After a specific time, "the view" would rotate throughout the groups and other ideas and views can be placed in the same document as an addition to the already existing ones. Whenever each group receive its file again, it's time for the mediator to compile the ideas and together with his/her group, organize the ideas and do an online presentation or a summary of what was discussed and the conclusions of the different groups about that topic.

In the Aquarium, students are going to be divided into different tasks. A statement will be given and two students should defend it, while two others should depreciate it (denominated "debaters"). Meanwhile they do that, each one of the debaters will have a student observation how arguments are being built during that presentation and/or discussion. At the end, the other students should be able to, using the arguments that were already used and other new ones, to position themselves in relation to the given statement. Observers should give their feedback to debaters and try to help them to defend their position in a better way. Debaters will also expose his/her difficulties and try to reveal finally their real opinion about the topic.

Pitching

In some classes, students individually or as a group, should present the conclusion of the task they have been producing in a small limited amount of time. Before the presentation, teacher assigns three different students to give feedback to the presenter. The first one should only comment on the positive aspects of the presentation. The second one should concentrate on the form it was done and the third one should present some ideas for the points that has been noticed that weren't that good in the presentation. Student that is giving the speech shouldn't defend himself and only listen to the ideas proposed. After all students have presented, the second round of presentations begins. Students are encouraged to present the same results again but now taking into account all the feedback that they had on the first presentation. In none of the activities, teachers gave their feedback and not even were asked for it. In this sense, students were the ones to help and support each other so that they could learn more about how to do it and how to receive feedback from others.

METHODOLOGY

The goal of this research was to investigate about collaborative learning in Finland. After some classes observations to understand and see how collaborative learning has been being used in classroom, some

questionnaires were applied to the International Business bachelor degree course at Tampere University of Applied Sciences (TAMK) in Tampere/Finland on October/2014, where 24 undergraduate students answered. The students' age vary between 20-29 years old (29% men and 71% women).

This paper is a previous study, to complement the authors' perspective. As a possibility for future works, this questionnaire might be applied in a large group of students so it can be statistically relevant. It can be also applied to teachers.

RESULTS

The analysis was based on the most representative answers. In the first question, when asked about the challenges of collaborative tasks, all students highlighted the difficulties on spreading the workload for all the group members equally and on matching timetables.

Other important question was about the pros and cons of the collaborative tasks, where most of the students highlighted as pros, the process of learning and finding answers together. As cons, the students highlighted the difficulties on finding time for meetings and one of the students highlighted that constant collaborative tasks were "annoying".

The third and last question was "how collaborative works helps your learning process". The students highlighted the possibility of getting different points of view when comparing with an individual activity and one student answered the possibility of learning everything in practice helping to understand the theory.

The Figure 1 shows a concept map that summarizes the answers of the research proceeded.

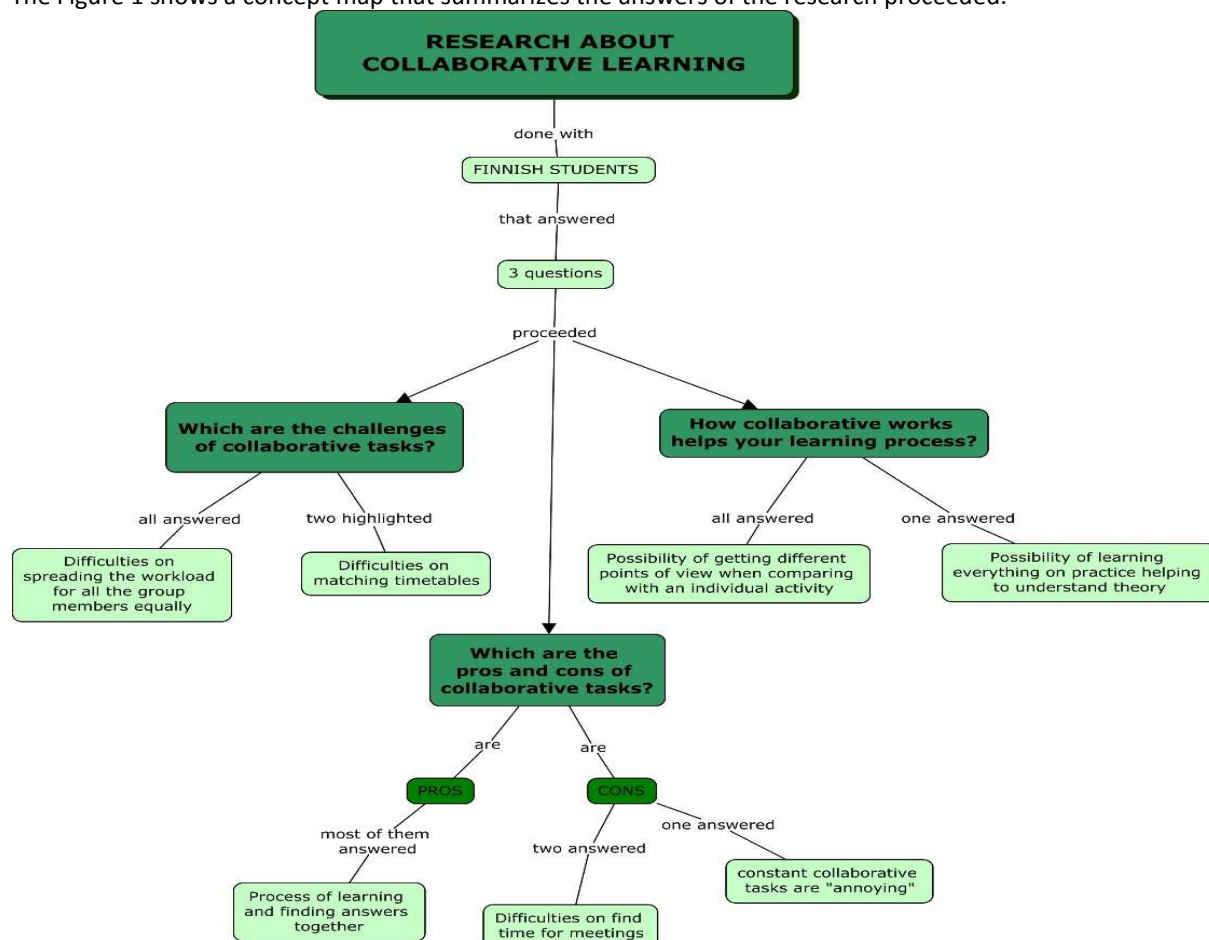


Figure 1: Concept map summarizing the students answers

CONCLUSIONS

The paper has focused on the social-constructivism employed in the finish education system and the learning methods, based on the social construction of knowledge.

From all the classes that were observed, collaborative learning is present in almost all of them. It is adapted to the subject studied and the kind of the student that takes part in that course, but all and all it is the main idea behind most activities done in classroom. Students are more in control of the learning process and create a web of trust among themselves, which will help them to develop social skills that are very important for future working life, such as networking and teamwork.

The students realized that there are difficulties on spreading the workload for all the group members equally, and some of them claimed about difficulties on matching timetable. Most of the students agreed that process of learning and finding answers together is positive and that it is hard to find time for meetings and one student mentioned that constant collaborative tasks are “annoying”. So, it shows that there has to be a compromise, between lectures and group tasks. One important answer was the one that all the students comment about the possibility of getting different points of view when comparing with individual tasks.

The most interesting of the collaborative approach is that it prepares the students not only for working life but also for life itself, where students (citizens) learn subjects and how to apply the theory learnt in groups, with different points of view, different experiences and schedules, respecting and discussing together, building the ideas and achieving better results.

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