

Collaborative Second Language Writing: An Activity Analysis of Web Conferencing

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Abstract

This article discusses an undergraduate second-language writing course that incorporated web conferencing. The study was informed by a sociocultural research approach known as activity theory [2]. Student reflective diary entries posted over ten weeks to the web conference helped identify features that supported or detracted from collaboration, peer evaluation and the co-construction of academic text. Employing activity theory, we outline two course objectives (collaborative writing and peer evaluation) and discuss the use of student feedback to modify web conferencing support.

1: Sociocultural approach to learning

Recent approaches to understanding second language learning and writing [5] are guided by sociocultural theory. Sociocultural approaches to second language learning are more inclusive of interactions among participants and with the learning context than information processing models of language learning [10]. In the sociocultural view, properties of the context that support language learning are called *affordances* [10].

A web conference is considered an *affordance* in that it supports the collaborative co-construction and peer evaluation of student texts. (However, a web conference may also be a *constraint*.) All students in this first year academic writing course were provided with web conference accounts. The web conference [11] – known locally as *Class Forum* (CF) – permits students to interact and to post group texts. All planning and final writing posted to CF by each group was publicly viewable by the other groups in the same class only.

2: Activity theory as a research approach

Sociocultural research into web-supported second language learning is a new area of inquiry [1]. Activity theory is a form of sociocultural research applicable to the context of web-supported learning, and it focuses on the

activity context of learning, rather than individual learning. Understanding the activity context requires a social and contextual unit of analysis, rather than an individual unit of analysis [2,4]. The unit of analysis in this study includes the entire course context, consisting of the instructor and students, course objectives, CF, collaborative writing, and peer evaluation. The course exemplifies the notion of *situated learning* [6]; students engage in a socially mediated form of writing where the instructor guides student writing both online and in class. Collaborative writing is afforded or constrained by CF.

2.1: Purpose and participants

In many writing courses, students work collaboratively not only to generate ideas and plans, but also to construct texts [3]. Support for including peer evaluation in a writing programme is found in the view that peers can usefully work together to improve each other's texts [9]. Scaffolding involves supporting students through multiple sources of assistance, including instructor feedback, peer support, online communication and information sources, and publishing. Collaborative writing and peer assessment was implemented to *scaffold* the production of text [7]. Little research exists about how web support can be modified progressively on the basis of student feedback.

The course objective was to prepare students for the academic writing requirements in their home schools and faculties within the university. The 120 students in the course were a diverse international group in their first year with varied expectations of the academic writing course. Students were expected to write extensively on a weekly basis. Student feedback about web-based collaborative writing was collected and responded to systematically.

3: Data collection and analysis

Students formed collaborative groups, and group writing was posted publicly to CF folders. Students also wrote diaries (viewable only by the student and the researchers) in response to prompts modified weekly on the basis of previous entries. Activity theory and previous

research experience with web-supported courses provided a basis for design modifications. Course improvement was guided formatively by student feedback.

The data considered here were the text scripts generated as diary entries. Since the diary entries were contributed weekly during a ten-week period, it was possible for the researchers to respond to comments and suggestions regularly. The weekly entries consisted of positive or negative comments, which established a baseline against which reliability and validity could be evaluated (e.g., feedback consistency about a CF feature could be verified qualitatively by comparing entries across individuals and within groups). In many cases, however, involving functionality and usability, a single instance of a problem was enough to justify a change.

As with the data collection of student diary entries, the researchers' own analysis and dialogue has been facilitated through the CF. The instructor primarily responsible for the course posted reflective comments following each class session. A panel of four subject area experts regularly read and discussed the diary entries and made formative revisions to the structure and content of the web course on a collaborative basis.

Whether a feature was considered to be an affordance or a constraint depended on student experience, the specific feature under consideration, and on perceptions of needs and goals. For example, initially, some students disliked the display of their identity photograph. Later, students realized that recognizing students simplified in-class group formation – supporting the decision to link student photos on CF from university records.

Also, the public visibility of text to other class members concerned some students who later realized that mutual visibility of texts created more opportunities for improvement. Thus, a constraint became an affordance – supporting the decision to enhance group features.

While separate folders for each assignment facilitated regular continuous assessment, feedback indicated that multiple assignments interfered with requirements in other courses. Here an affordance for collaborative writing made possible by the CF structure was interpreted as a constraint. Yet, by the end of the course students had come to prefer continuous relatively smaller assignments.

Finally, asynchronicity in CF permits second language writers to participate actively in writing outside class without the response demands of oral communication. However, asynchronicity is constrained by a lack of proximity necessary in reciprocal peer work [7,8]. Appropriately, students arranged face-to-face meetings by phone to support online work. We intend to add WAP access.

4: Conclusion

Activity theory research in social and technical contexts is well documented [2,3,7]. Pedagogic arguments

for collaborative writing and peer feedback activities include benefits arising from the exploration of language in low-risk contexts, from increased audience-awareness and responsiveness, from enhanced revision of one's own writing, and from a realistic comparative basis for self-assessment of writing [3]. Our own view was that CF could serve to coordinate and manage these complex objectives. Accordingly, we framed our study within a sociocultural approach to learning and selected activity theory as our research model.

The formative commentary provided by students, while still useful after course completion, is most valuable while the course is in progress. Future research should work towards improved collection and application of formative feedback on course structure and CF features.

Finally, research emphasizing intended outcomes under-reports events in progress. During a course, student adaptations to course design or CF structuring may conceal design flaws and result in a lost opportunity. Consequently, valuable information may be overlooked or remain unused. Through ongoing examination of student perceptions about the affordances and constraints of course and web conference features, within an activity theory framework, it was possible to implement changes responsive to student needs.

5: Selected references

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