Response to DiPasquale’s call for Increased Scaffolding to Support Online Collaborative Learning

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Reflecting on his admittedly “individualistic” experiences with the principles of learning (PoL) wiki assignment, DiPasquale lends thoughtful insight into why he believes the assignment falls short in providing meaningful and direct collaboration amongst peers.

In the lead article of this issue, Hunter explained that he wanted his students to have ownership of their contributions to the course wiki. Balancing this well-intended desire to put learners in leading roles to develop and enhance a shared resource with the apparent need for more structured collaboration is, understandably, a challenging undertaking for any educator implementing this type of assignment. Furthermore, when the open-ended and sometimes loosely structured nature of a wiki may be part of its allure to those who support the benefits of social-constructivist learning, how does one go about requiring sufficient collaboration, assigning roles, and delegating tasks, without stifling creativity and limiting possibilities? This is not likely an unsolvable dilemma but one that requires careful thought and planning to overcome. DiPasquale makes a few key recommendations which will be addressed further on this commentary.

It is important to note that learners’ tendencies to take an individualistic or “divide and conquer” approach to what are intended to be collaborative activities are certainly not limited to wiki assignments. As a faculty developer, I have heard concerns regarding the idea that learners often divvy up tasks on group assignments only to assemble the pieces together just before submitting the final product in many discussions with faculty. In other words, instead of taking a collaborative approach, which would involve engaging in meaningful dialogue, learners may opt for a cooperative approach, despite the instructor’s intentions for the assignment (Paulus, 2005). There is a host of reasons why this might happen, and, as suggested in the article, a need for many learners to be pushed – albeit gently – into collaborating with their peers, particularly when doing so will allow them to obtain a richer, more meaningful learning experience.
DiPasquale recommends increased scaffolding on the part of the instructor and, with that, the use of communication tools, such as existing discussion tools as ways to promote collaboration in the PoL wiki assignment. Exploring next steps in putting these recommendations into practice is another area for discussion. For example, DiPasquale shared that, although a discussion tab was available on each page of the wiki, students were not sufficiently encouraged to make use of it. Perhaps the well-established Wikipedia community would be one place to look for inspiration here. As mentioned in the lead article, both Wikipedia and the PoL wiki use the MediaWiki platform. The discussion and talk pages, available through the MediaWiki platform, may serve as useful spaces for editors to communicate their rationales for implemented changes or ideas to improve the quality of articles. It can be interesting to browse through the talk page on Wikipedia articles to see the trail of commentary posted by editors who are invested in improving the quality of specific pages. Shane-Simpson and Brooks (2016) recommended teaching students how to use talk pages, including for the purposes of peer review, when using Wikipedia editing assignments with undergraduate students. Additionally, Lund and Smørдал (2006) stated that the discussions area should serve as space for the educator to indicate their presence in a wiki. Regardless of where the dialogue should take place, there are options – within and external to the elected wiki platform – for building this element more explicitly into the PoL wiki assignment.

Lastly, as someone who has visited the PoL wiki a number of times over the past several years, I am impressed by the contributions of its student editors and by the very idea that recent students, such as DiPasquale, have the ability to refine and extend the work of previous students over several iterations of the course. How often do we find examples of current students developing the contributions of their course predecessors in this way? Ideas for future iterations of the assignment aside, that – in my opinion – is an especially interesting affordance of this type of assignment and another thought-worthy outcome of DiPasquale’s analysis of his contributions to the PoL wiki.

**REFERENCES**

