How to Support Collaboration in a Learning Community

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Abstract

Learning communities are widely used in different educational contexts. This case presents some viewpoints of using Learning Communities (LC) with adult students of Social Services at a University of Applied Sciences in Finland. The studies are carried out as blended learning, i.e. as a combination of face-to-face and online learning. After the graduation, these students can work as social services professionals and some students can also obtain the qualification to work as an early childhood educator. In both sectors, the work is often done in teams. It is also one of the aims in our studies that students learn to collaborate and reflect together as part of their studies and prepare to work in teams. The adult students coming to study at our UAS have very differing educational backgrounds. Some of them have already completed their Master's studies in some different subject and some students have taken lower-level vocational studies in social services. Some of these students have a lot of experience from the social field or from early childhood education and some students have none. The heterogeneity of the group causes some challenges but it also creates many possibilities for collaborative and reflective learning. This paper is part of a larger research-based development process that focuses on the extensive question "How to use learning communities in higher education". This article presents some first findings of the development process, concentrating on students' experiences of LCs after their first study year. The findings will show some factors that the students consider enhancing or hindering their collaborative and reflective learning in LCs.

Keywords: Learning community, collaboration, higher education, blended learning, development

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Introduction

Nowadays, learning theories highlight the social aspect of learning. Several learning theories and philosophies, such as experiential learning, inquiry learning, social constructivism and sociocultural views of learning form the theoretical framework for this article. The link between all these theories is the idea that learning takes place through reflection and collaboration. On the other hand, collaboration and reflection are also important goals of learning in our context. The ability to work collaboratively and reflect critically are highly valuable both in the field of social services and early childhood education. In both sectors, it is important to collaborate with colleagues and clients and to construct a shared meaning of work and its aims.

Another aspect is the reason for talking about learning communities instead of just group work or learning in a group. Our aim is that students get involved in a learning community throughout their studies. We have big student cohorts, about sixty students in total, and in addition, there are two different cohorts starting their studies each year; one cohort in January and another in September. There are many studies showing that learning communities can foster learning in higher education (e.g. Anderson & McCune 2013; Hill & Haigh 2012). Lindfors (2010, 30) adds, that collaborative work and learning are not possible without a learning community. We have also found out that it is easier for the students in the beginning of their studies to get involved in their own learning community and first get to know this smaller group of students. In our case, one learning community has about ten students who are sometimes working in a big group and sometimes in smaller groups. However, in some of our studies we do not use group work at all.

The adult students coming to study have very differing educational backgrounds. Some of them have already completed their Master's studies in some different subject and some students have taken lower-level vocational studies in social services. Some of these students have a lot of experience from the social field or from early childhood education and some other students have none. The heterogeneity of the group causes some challenges but it also creates many possibilities for collaborative and reflective learning. Hughes (2007) has warned that there is always the danger of assuming that learner diversity is well understood. According to Anderson and McCune (2013, 285) it can be seen as a significant weakness if we do not pay enough attention to the community members' heterogeneity of motives, experiences and trajectories. These factors are also relevant in students' experiences presented in this article.

As mentioned, our studies are implemented as blended learning. The students have one week of face-to-face learning a month in school premises and three weeks both individual assignments and working online with teachers and peer groups. Online learning is both synchronous and asynchronous. Working online causes some more challenges for collaborative learning. (e.g. Hughes 2007.)

Beginning of research-oriented development

In the beginning of year 2016, we had our first big cohort of adult students. To handle this new situation, we thought that this is the time for us to do something different from the very beginning. We did not have more teachers but we had more students, which is a global trend. We had two tutors for this cohort, who decided, with support

from our student counsellor, to create six learning communities (LC) for these sixty new adult students. Unfortunately, I need to confess that we did not have a clear plan for the role of the learning community in all studies. In addition, we did not have a shared understanding of LCs with all teachers. At first, there were many ways to use and divide these communities in smaller groups in different studies. Different teachers gave different meanings for LCs and for group work in general.

The students also gave different meanings for LCs. These meanings can vary between different students and different studies. In the beginning of their studies, students felt that they got a lot of peer support for many kinds of things. Some students were more familiar with technical questions, new software and virtual learning environments, and could help others in these questions. Some students were more familiar with writing reports and could assist others in this. Many students have told us how important it was to write a learning assignment first together and be then ready to write a report alone. Anderson and McCune (2013, 289) have presented that "students are working to find effective ways of participating within particular knowledge practices". This is a very interesting and large question; what could be an effective way for each student, with a different background, different experiences, different interests and different conceptions of learning, to get involved in shared tasks and collaboration in higher education? There are such students in each group who feel that it would be easier and most effective for them to do all the learning assignments alone and not wait for or help others. However, doing all the assignments alone is not an option, because learning about team work is also one of the aims in our studies. The challenge is to find a balance between the time the group works together and each member individually, and how these two styles of working are connected with each other. How can we support individual learners to be involved in working in a team and to work in a learning community? Next, I will present the development process we have started in order to get answers for these questions.

After the first study year, we always interview our students to ask about their experiences of their studies. This time we also asked about the students' experiences of working in learning communities. We heard many very good experiences but also some more concerning ones. These interviews were the start of a more systematic development. The main goal is "to improve learning community practices so that they offer optimal possibilities for students' learning and learning to work in teams". We had the need to make this process more transparent for both the students and teachers.

The focus in this work is in development, not in research. The research methods used make this development process more visible. In research, however, research methods are used more precisely. In research-oriented development, the aim is to get enough information to know where we are now and how to proceed. One aim is that development is a shared process between teachers and students. It is also important to ask if we are proceeding top – down or bottom – up. In this development work, we use both ways. On one hand, teachers and the curriculum provide some aims for professional development and on the other hand, the aim is that the students will develop their collaborative and reflective practices and develop as a learning community.

Students' experiences of the advantages and challenges in learning communities

After interviewing the students to find out about their experiences from their first study year, we gathered these findings together and presented them for the students. The main outcome at this phase was that most students had many good experiences of working in a learning community. They told about peer support and how important it has been in the beginning of studies. Many students told us that it was much easier and quicker to get answers from other students than from teachers. The peers have supported with coping, writing, searching knowledge etc. The students felt that it has been important and rewarding to share experiences and find new friends. Another outcome was that there is also something to develop further. We talked about the aim to learn to work in teams and we discussed commitment and learning.

After presenting these findings to the students, we told them that we would like to understand their working in LCs more deeply and we asked them to write a short essay about their experiences of belonging or not-belonging to a group. Below, I present some of the findings from these essays.

Collaborative and reflective learning requires that students are ready to share their experiences, thoughts and understanding with each other in their learning community. There is also the presumption that the students are ready to build up shared meanings, joint aims and mutual understanding in different study assignments. The students' essays included some examples of this not happening. However, it is important to notice that most essays only included positive experiences and the students seemed very happy working in LCs, and only 12 students out of 60 told us some negative experiences of belonging to a group.

According to Anderson and McCune (2013, 285), the key issue for 21st century higher education institutions is to pay attention to power relations. The authors highlight that when higher education institutions often have a diverse and multicultural student body, it is important to search for the students' voices to be heard and find out ways to foster mutual respect and equity of treatment. Our students are all native Finns and mainly female, but the heterogeneity appears in many other ways. They are different ages, ranging from 23 to 54 years, different educational background, various work experiences, and different trajectories and interests. The students' stories had many examples where they pondered how the different voices are heard in a group and how open the group is. There were also many examples of peer support and its significance. Some of these findings are collected in the next two tables.

Table 1. Students' ecperiences about openness

good experiences about openness	bad experiences about openness
Each person has a place in a group Each person is heard in a group The atmosphere is free to breath There is fairness in a group There is permission to speak openly Openness and multivoices support learning There is permission to show one's weaknesses The group accepts you as you are The differences are seen as a strength	The group does not accept, it judges and leaves you out Decisions are not made together The group takes your energy and strength You are not allowed to reflect aloud during the groupwork There is competition inside the group The group does not share all ideas Some participants are dominating, talking too much and not listening to other participants Feeling that your own competence is questioned in the group Various educational backgrounds are not valued in the group The heterogeneity is not accepted in the group

Table 2. Students' experiences of support

Examples of support	No support
The group makes you feel safe The group supports The group is a resource, it helps in learning The group gives you motivation You can make friends in the group The group helps you to adapt in a new city	The group limits your learning motivation The group does not always support Some people make interprets in the group There is too much complaining in the group There are free riders in the group, which is annoying Too familiar a group is not concentrating on its learning assignment Correcting the mistakes of other participants takes your energy and time

Each student group might also have some students who are not very committed to their studies and just want to be ready as soon as possible. There can be different reasons for this attitude, but the challenge is how to handle these differences in motivation and commitment in a learning community. Some students also wrote that it is frustrating if the group changes too often. The research data showed experiences that students sometimes have too many different group assignments going on at the same time and it has been difficult to remember e.g. which Facebook or WhatsApp group was for which assignment.

Workshop for students

The next step in the development process was to share the findings of the essays with the students and to have a workshop where the students were able to reflect on these issues. Some students told us that the results sound very realistic and familiar. Some students were more astonished by the existence of such negative experiences, like the feeling of not being respected. After this discussion, we had a short theoretical part

where we talked about the psychological capital, professional identity and the meaning of positive interaction.

After the theory session, the students were working in their own big learning communities with the following questions:

> What kind of psychological and social capital do you have in your LC?
> How could you strengthen the positivity in your LC?
> Which aims do you set for the development of your LC?

The following table presents the aims that the students of the six LCs set for the development of their own LCs. Each LC named 2-4 aims, and these aims were partly the same and partly different between the different LCs. I do not reflect the differences between the LCs in this context, but present all the aims in one table:

Table 3: Students' developmental aims for Learning Communities

More open discussion and constructive and developing feedback
Space for individual growth and development
Shared reflection and discussion of professional identity
More discussion about tasks and how they are understood
Shared reflection and evaluation of group work afterwards
Getting to know each other and taking advantage of the various experiences and competences in a group
Open discussion in case of problems with timetables or such
Keeping up the positive atmosphere, peer support, striving for conscious positivity
Reflection of our own attitudes and ways of working, and getting out of our comfort zone

Students told us that it was important to talk more about their psychological capital and to get to know each other a little bit better. For us teachers this was an important clue for realizing that this kind of a conversation could be scheduled a little bit earlier, maybe after a half-year of studies. However, it cannot be too early, because there is already so much new information the students get during the first school months.

Conclusions

This research-based development process is still in the beginning and there are many things to learn and reflect. These first experiences have also raised new questions. What is the meaning of a learning community for a student's professional identity? I have reflected on this question in another presentation and article (in ECP 2017). In blended learning, students work virtually a lot and working online arises many new questions and challenges for collaboration. These questions also need more reflection in another context. I have shared these first findings with the other teachers in our degree programme. After discussing the various experiences of group work, we decided to expand this learning community practice in all our study groups and develop it further together. We even founded our own learning community for the

teachers. The future will show how we can find the time and enthusiasm to continue this development process together.

The philosophy behind this paper refers to postmodernism. In postmodernism, the language and knowledge are seen as relational and generative. The aim of collaborative discussion is that each participant feels that their voice is equally important, there is the freedom to present many voices, and the new knowledge is constructed based on this open dialogue. The aim is not to find or construct "the one and only truth", but to generate new perspectives together. This kind of working is also important for social service students in client work; to listen to the clients and construct new knowledge together with them. (cf. Anderson 2007.)

It is obvious that collaborative discussion is not always easy to reach. When there are big differences between the participants' experiences and capabilities, there is always the risk that someone is using more of an expert voice. It is also important to listen to this voice of experience, but the challenge is how to use this expert voice as one view and at the same time keep the ways open also for new and diverse ideas. How can we prevent that the expert voice does override the other voices? Anderson (2007, 34) has suggested that it might be impossible to teach someone to be collaborative, but we can invite and facilitate a collaborative and generative learning community, where there is learning taking place for all. I think that keeping the dialogue open to all voices also means that the participants need to be aware of these dangers of expert domination and of the meaning of dialogue and collaboration. This kind of working also makes demand for learning assignments. Not all the assignments give space for a dialogue. The assignment must be open enough to allow and even prefer new and innovative solutions. Anderson and McCune (2013, 290) highlight that it is important that the tasks are relevant and connected to real working life and that students can raise their own questions. The assignments need to give space for the students' own thinking, questioning and creation of meaning.

We are creating a new curriculum for our educational programme. In this process, it is important to think about the role of learning communities and how they could best support learning and the development of students' professional identity. Trede et al. (2012, also referring to Bauman 2009), suggest that the "identity has become slippery, flexible and always on the move". Working life and the labor market are changing rapidly and careers are often fragmented. This means that the educators should also plan their curricula and teaching in a way that they will help students to recognize and develop their changing identity. Trede et al. (2012, 382) suggest that the curriculum should not only "teach technical skills and theoretical knowledge but also the valuable nature of the profession involved". Valuable aims for our students would be e.g. to learn to work in teams and to collaborate with divergent people.

Acknowledgements

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