

The process of developing a collaborative working relationship in an intercultural collaborative project using ICT

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Research Background

Since Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is a powerful tool for collaboration in education, educators pay more attention to ICT for conducting a collaborative distance-learning project with heterogeneous groups (hereafter: “an intercultural collaborative project”). Many case studies on intercultural collaborative projects have already been conducted. For instance in primary education, Japanese students produced a storybook with Palestinian refugee students in Syria using a video conferencing system and emails (Kishi et al. 2010). At the secondary level, students communicated with native students in abroad as a part of English subject through a video conferencing and emails (Sakurai, 2007). In higher education, the Japanese students who’s major is Japanese education taught Japanese language to American students who study Japanese at College in Hawaii using video conferencing and Social Network Services (Kishi & Otani, 2014). By connecting people with people at a distance through ICT, educators can open their classes to society implement open-ended education. Such a learning environment encourages students to create knowledge and to develop a relationship to learn from each other (Muukkonen et al., 2010).

In general, such learning environments are well prepared by teachers and instructors (instructors). In many cases of intercultural collaborative projects at schools, the instructors design necessary resources, appropriate tools and rules for collaboration

in advance to complete the project within the limited time by a curriculum. Social cognitive tensions will occur when students meet with heterogeneous groups through ICT because students will meet different viewpoints, values, rule, manners and concepts. The social cognitive tension provides opportunities to develop a collaborative working relationship with the heterogeneous group (Andriessen et al., 2010).

Developing a collaborative working relationship through ICT will be one competency that should be nurtured in education. The DeSeCo Project classified conceptual frameworks for key competencies into three broad categories:

First, individuals need to be able to use a wide range of tools for interacting effectively with the environment: both physical ones such as information technology and socio-cultural ones such as the use of language. They need to understand such tools well enough to adapt them for their own purposes – to use tools interactively. Second, in an increasingly interdependent world, individuals need to be able to engage with others, and since they will encounter people from a range of backgrounds, it is important that they are able to interact in heterogeneous groups. Third, individuals need to be able to take responsibility for managing their own lives, situate their lives in the broader social context and act autonomously” (OECD, 2003, p.5).

So far, there are, however, a few researches on the process of how students develop a collaborative working relationship in an intercultural collaborative project, although previous case studies have already reported the outcomes of such project work.

Research Purpose

In this paper, the authors clarify the process of how students developed a collaborative working relationship with heterogeneous groups. A case study of an intercultural collaborative project was conducted at Meiji University in the capital of Japan and Yamagata University in a remote region through ICT.

Outline of the Practice

The intercultural collaborative project was conducted with the aim of investigating attractive aspects of Japanese culture from geographically different viewpoints of undergraduate students in Tokyo and Yamagata prefecture. Students at both universities investigated these aspects of Japanese culture from geographical and historical viewpoints. This course in Meiji University is one of the practices where students can communicate a wide variety of attractions of Japanese culture using movies, previous knowledge and experiences learned in lectures and their own research under the vision of the School of Global Studies, which has a comprehensive curriculum designed to enable students to be familiar with their native country and to explain Japanese culture to

the world. Students from Meiji and Yamagata Universities kept in touch to produce a movie about Japanese cultures collaboratively, through discussions using ICT.

The class consists of 23 students from sophomore to senior at Meiji University (three of them are auditors) and twelve students at Yamagata University.

The course consisted of 15 lessons. After an instructor had explained the overview in the first lesson, students discussed and decided themes to work on and divided into three large theme groups. After the third to the fifth lessons, students in the respective groups started communicating with Yamagata University to complete their respective group proposal for their project.

From the sixth lesson, each group proposed the method and in-class content to the instructor, taking this role over from the instructor who had provided the method and in-class contents during the first to fifth lessons. The Meiji University students proposed their plan of activity for next class a day before the class, using Google Hangouts. Students received feedback from the instructor, and then carried out the activity based on their proposal. On week thirteen, each group presented their work. At the very end, week fourteen, students reflected on the course.

Research Design and Methods

To clarify the process of how students develop a collaborative working relationship, the authors collected qualitative data from Meiji University students. The data was collected through the following two ways; (1) individual free description posted on the closed SNS community after group reflection on a collaborative work relationship, (2) a final term report submitted by individual students about collaborative work relationships asking (a) how to develop a collaborative working relationship, (b) what difficulties (issues) occurred and how to solve them and (c) any suggestion to develop a collaborative working relationship using ICT based on their experience.

Results and Discussion

As a result of the analysis, it was found that there were three stages in the process of developing a collaborative working relationship. In the first stage, the members got to know each other and had a sense of belonging as a project member. In the second stage, the members shared common objectives and responsibilities according to members' interests and competence. In the third stage, the members constructed ways and rules for working collaboratively (planning, mutual monitoring, interdependent support and so on).

In the first stage, both students seemed to speak hesitantly through Skype at the beginning of the project. They needed to develop a collaborative working relationship only through ICT within a limited time. The students found it was not enough to communicate only in the class through Skype, and so they started to communicate more frequently outside of the classroom using online chatting such as Facebook and LINE. After more communication not only in the classroom but also informal communication outside of class, they expressed their ideas and feelings more freely and had a sense of belonging as project members.

In the second stage, students shared a common goal within their group after getting a better understanding of each other. Since students had not experienced an intercultural collaborative project, it was difficult for them to expect what they can achieve through the project and to set up the goals. Under the supervision of their instructor, students set up the common goal that was neither too easy nor too hard to achieve. To collaboratively achieve the goal, there is a need to consider each member's abilities so that each member can actively commit oneself.

In the third stage, students finally started to work on to the project, thinking about an efficient way of working collaboratively throughout the time. The members constructed ways and rules for working collaboratively such as planning, mutual monitoring, interdependent support, and so on. In this stage, respective members worked individually for their assigned work and reported the progress regularly to other group members. By this time, keeping the member's motivation high becomes the important key. Each member cooperated and respected each other to make the project fun. Also, the important part for proceeding is planning. It needs to be realistic and planned to be completed by the deadline. Group members monitored each other regularly to make sure the project was on the right track. Thus, the students found appropriate ways to work collaboratively and shared them as rules of the project work.

Conclusion

In this paper, the authors clarified the process of how students developed a collaborative working relationship between heterogeneous groups. A case study of an intercultural collaborative project was conducted at Meiji University in the capital of Japan and Yamagata University in a remote region through ICT. As a result of the analysis, it was found there were three stages in the process. The three stages suggest ways in which educators who want to conduct an intercultural collaborative project can support students to develop collaborative working relationships.

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