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Online collaborative learning: The case of the EsCAlADE training experiment

Gilberto Marzano

Rezekne Academy of Technologies, Latvia

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There is a broad consensus that a collaborative learning approach is effective for adult learners, since they can share their experiences and build knowledge together.

However, because collaborative attitudes do not always develop spontaneously in a group, strategies and techniques are necessary to facilitate collaborative learning and help learners to achieve effective results.

The EScAlADE project

EScAlADE is a two-year EU funded project that was launched in September 2015. Its aim is to investigate how an adult participatory learning approach can be realised in an online environment.

It involves the participation of partners from five EU countries (Italy, Latvia, Poland, Spain, and Greece), and focuses on the impact of social factors on adult education and, more specifically, on adult online collaborative learning.

The main Intellectual output of EScAlADE is a training course, in an online environment, the we designed in order to study the three forms of interaction that can affect the teaching-learning process (Moore, 1989), namely:

- Learner interaction with the content, that refers to the learner's engagement with the content of the course, which is influenced by the learners' prior personal knowledge, motivation, and attitudes;
- Learner interaction with the instructor, that essentially refers to the instructor's ability to stimulate the learner's level of interest or their ability to motivate them;
- Learner interaction with other learners, that refers to the degree of interaction between other learners or amongst learners in a group.

A collaborative learning approach has been adopted for the training course.

PBworks and social learning features have been used to realise the online learning environment. PBworks is a commercial platform developed for educational purposes that allows users to build a free wiki workspace in which trainers and trainees can create and publish content and post comments.

The training course was realised with the aim of providing low-qualified adults with basic notions of computing. It encompasses four distinct modules:

- Web searching: using search engines and browsers, formulating queries, and analysing results;
- Email: creating email accounts, writing/answering emails, writing professional emails, and email management;
- Messengers: introducing popular messenger apps, using messengers, and creating effective messages;
- Professional use of social media: searching for jobs online, using online translators, and cloud computing.

The training course is conducted through four sessions, two face-to-face and two virtual:

Propaedeutic activities (4 hours face-to-face), for the presentation of the course objectives, the creation and motivation of four participatory groups, etc.;

Learning modules (14 hours online);

Participatory tasks (10 hours online);

Results presentation and discussion (4 hours face-to-face).

During the training course, experts observe the trainees and trainers to evaluate their attitudes to the participatory process.

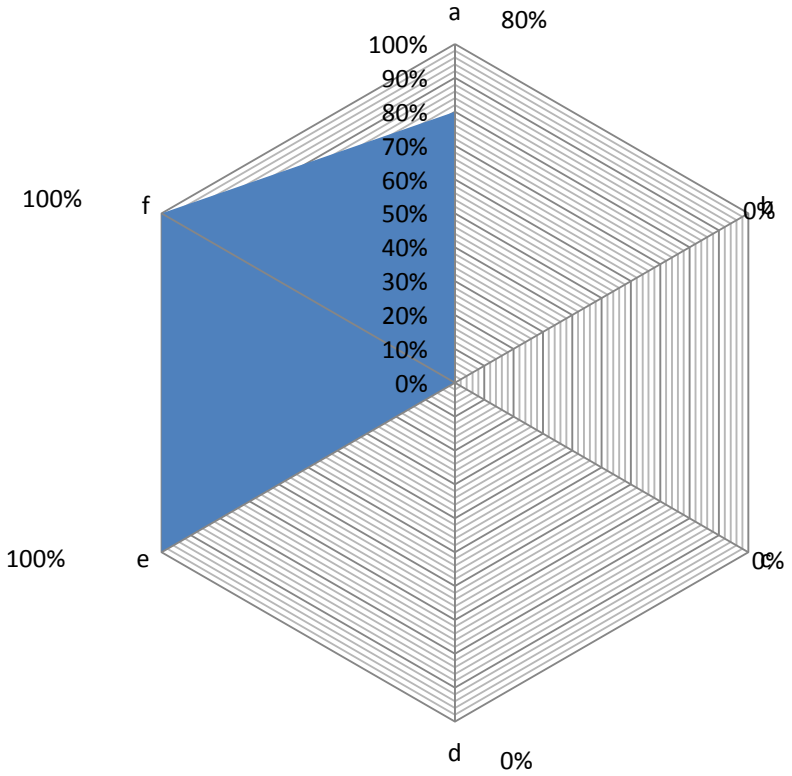
Activities reviewed and noted during the training experiment:

- Questions posed to the trainer
- Questions posed to other learners
- Questions asked
- Messages sent to the trainer
- Messages sent to other learners
- Knowledge shared (content and links)
- Internet searches
- The number of hours spent online

A short training event was organised to train the trainers, using the same methodology as the training course itself. The trainees' group comprised 21 participants

Country	Professional	Researcher	Other
Italy	4	-	-
Latvia	-	4	1
Spain	1	-	1
Poland	4	1	1
Greek	5	-	-

The results of the short training event have been positive



Some issue and biases

The first issue concerns the choice of technology.

The second is related to the use of digital technologies; we have indicated this issue as the *presumption of digital knowledge*.

The third issue is that the spirit of collaboration is accepted in principle but disregarded in reality.

The fourth issue concerns the organisation of synchronous online activities.

Conclusion

We can confirm that collaborative learning and social learning foster the development of critical thinking through discussion, the clarification of ideas, and the evaluation of the views of others.

However, our opinion is that online collaboration requires mastery both of skills and technology, as well as the use of applications that are suitably designed and the involvement of skilled facilitators.