

# Facilitating Collaborative Online Learning: Experiences From a Finnish-Scottish Project for Vocational Educators

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**Abstract:** This paper outlines work in progress to support an international project, titled Collaborative Online Learning in Global Education (COLIGE), which aims to engage vocational educators in collaboration with international peers to enhance their understanding of the nature of learners in different contexts and expand opportunities for developing global education competences. A case study of a collaboration process co-designed for participants of a Vocational Teacher Education Programme in Finland and the Teaching Qualification for Further Education in Scotland is outlined and facilitators' reflections on designing and supporting online collaboration for a multi-national group are detailed. The paper draws on the concepts of task ownership, character and control (Kirschner et al. 2004) to explore facilitators' experiences. Findings suggest that facilitators play multiple roles, which include designing activities within programme constraints and resources; allowing appropriate learner control and authentic engagement with meaningful tasks; encouraging task ownership; and engaging in live online facilitation with sensitivity to learner needs and co-facilitator approaches. Successful design of international online collaboration also requires articulation of assumptions about approaches to teaching and learning, and opportunities for meaningful socialisation and development of shared cultural understandings. The findings have implications for vocational educators planning or developing international online collaboration and inform effective methods for the development of intercultural activities for vocational educators.

**Keywords:** collaborative online learning, vocational education, global education, facilitation, online teaching

## 1. Introduction

The use of technology provides expanding opportunities for international collaboration between learners in different contexts. Mobile and web technologies have been successfully employed to support virtual cultural exchange and collaborative activity between learners enrolled in institutions from different countries, for example in language learning (e.g. Lee and Markey 2014; Lazar 2014), and cross-disciplinary collaboration (Cochrane et al. 2011). However, a dearth of literature exists with respect to online collaboration in vocational contexts. This paper outlines work in progress as part of the COLIGE (Collaborative Online Learning in Global Education) project to support collaborative online learning for the participants of a Vocational Teacher Education Programme in Finland and the Teaching Qualification for Further Education (TQFE) in Scotland. The aims of the project are to engage vocational educators in collaboration with international peers to enhance their understanding of the nature of learners in different contexts and expand opportunities for developing global education competences. This paper outlines the collaboration process and details the facilitators' reflections on designing and supporting online activities for this multi-national group of vocational educators. The process and facilitators' experiences are explored in relation to the concepts of task ownership, character and control (Kirschner et al. 2004).

## 2. The collaboration process

Working within the existing curricula of the two vocational education programmes in Scotland and Finland, a collaboration project was initiated in 2014 to provide an opportunity for international collaboration for a cohort of vocational teacher education students which:

- *aligned with existing course structures and timetables.* The two courses - 'Global Education' (Finland) and 'Successful Learners in Further Education' (Scotland) - are underpinned by national standards for practitioners, and have distinct objectives and structures. They adopt similar blended delivery models, including face-to-face and online activities, independent study and facilitated collaboration.

- *used technologies with which learners were already familiar.* Routinely used technologies, including email, virtual learning environments (VLE) and web conferencing software were employed.
- *involved meaningful and achievable tasks.* The process required careful design of a common project to ensure that collaboration was manageable within time constraints and had direct relevance to practice in order to avoid overburdening participants.

The collaboration involved the participants of the two programmes undertaking an activity that included several key tasks, supported by pre-activity briefings and local support and discussion. A template (available as a word document from [www.slideshare.net/sarahcornelius](http://www.slideshare.net/sarahcornelius)) provided structure and instructions under the following tasks:

- Task 1: Scottish participants described details of their teaching practice class environment and context to the Finnish students, focusing particularly on learner characteristics and needs;
- Task 2: Finnish participants discussed Scottish class details during their course sessions and designed a lesson plan relating to a global education theme that they deemed appropriate for the Scottish classroom context with which they were paired;
- Task 3: Scottish participants reviewed and commented on the lesson plans; and
- Task 4: Participants met online in real time to discuss general issues and challenges associated with globalising education.

Tasks 1, 2 and 3 were facilitated using email and VLEs, whilst Task 4 required the use of web conferencing software available via the University of Aberdeen.

The activity was particularly meaningful in the context of the Finnish course, since it formed a major element of course work. For the Scottish participants, the activity complemented course content on learners' characteristics and needs, and offered an additional perspective that could be brought into an assignment task. Overall the project design attempted to address the problem of how to provide global education in a local context. This was tackled in meaningful stages which could be undertaken in an authentic environment and with opportunities for cognitive feedback. This design approach aligns with recommendations for effective task character for collaborative learning environments as outlined in Kirschner et al. (2004).

### **3. Research process**

An action research approach was used for enquiry into the development of the collaborative process with data collected to outline the students' and facilitators' perceptions of outcomes as well as support process evaluation and inform planning for future collaboration. Data include in-session evaluations, post-session questionnaires and recordings of reflective discussion between the facilitators. This paper focuses on the facilitation role, and draws primarily on the transcript of semi-structured discussion between the facilitators. Content analysis was undertaken, focusing on the question 'What was done to facilitate collaboration?' Findings presented here reveal the importance of 'behind the scenes' facilitation, careful preparation to develop an activity with a high level of task ownership and appropriate task character, and exploration of assumptions by facilitators. The following sections highlight the complex role of the joint facilitation offered by the tutors.

#### **3.1 'Setting the scene' for effective collaboration**

The collaborative process was developed in response to the facilitators' desire to capitalise on an opportunity for international collaboration. A face-to-face meeting and online discussions revealed synergies between the two programmes and a common wish to provide meaningful international learning experiences for participants. Planning discussions revealed similar underpinning principles and curriculum structures so development activities focused on finding practical 'first steps' that would engage current students in collaboration while fitting in with existing studies.

A significant facilitator role during the early stages was to ensure 'buy in' and commitment to the collaborative process. This was facilitated for the Finnish participants by building the activity into a substantive assignment

task in the course design. In addition, the Finnish group of learners were already 'well versed' in the expectations for individual contributions in online environments as a result of previous engagement in online collaborative activities. In the Scottish context, getting students to invest in the activity required a careful 'build up' during which 'seeds were planted' about the opportunity for collaboration and participants were reassured about feasibility and the commitment required. Participants had to be convinced that the task was manageable, particularly in terms of the technologies being used, and that it would not be a significant addition within the context of existing course tasks and schedules. In both cases, face-to-face discussions were held to clarify the purpose of the collaboration and to motivate participants.

Due to the need to fit in with the previously scheduled timetables for both programmes, the initial collaboration process was planned over a relatively short timeframe – with Tasks 1, 2, and 3 allocated 1 week each. This short timeline was seen to restrict opportunities for personal introductions and the development of deeper, shared understandings of the different international contexts. This factor is notable since Lee and Markey (2014) emphasise the need to allocate sufficient time to online collaboration, and, although tasks were completed effectively, participants in this activity also expressed a desire to have more time available.

During the early stages of the process, facilitators aimed for high levels of task ownership (Kirschner et al. 2004) by encouraging a sense of belonging and commitment to the international group through the development of an activity that demanded individual accountability and a positive interdependence between the multi-national participants. To complete the activity participants relied on each other to adequately complete the tasks assigned to them in order to complete their own work. Furthermore, they provided interpretation and explanation of locally relevant information to support each other's work, with facilitators also contributing as appropriate.

### **3.2 Facilitating international real-time collaboration**

Limited time was available for synchronous communication, therefore the live online session was planned to allow groups with similar professional interests to meet, pairing up those students who had worked with similar contexts in the activity, and discussion of general issues of global education. The agenda was full, yet a majority of participants reported that they enjoyed the session, found it useful, and appreciated the opportunity to speak directly to international peers. Student feedback also indicated strong interest in an expanded collaboration process and more real-time discussion.

Active discussion during the synchronous online session was facilitated by the fact that the Finnish participants had several months experience of live online interaction before taking part in the collaborative activity, and understood that they should 'join in and get active quickly'. For the Scottish participants live online engagement was a relatively new experience. These students had used web conferencing software only twice before meeting the Finnish students online, but no significant issues were faced by participants during the session.

The experience of jointly facilitating the live online session revealed several assumptions that could have been discussed more fully by facilitators to ensure an effective learning experience. Key issues concerned approaches to task control (Kirschner et al. 2004), with both facilitators assuming that a learner-centred approach would be appropriate. In part this assumption may have been based on a common interest in vocational education, where learner-centred approaches and active learning predominate, but it is recognised that co-facilitation in intercultural contexts may require additional clarification of facilitators' approaches to teaching and learning and their expectations of task control.

Facilitators' reflections also revealed the importance of adopting a similar approach during the live online session. It was assumed that the facilitator whose web conferencing system was used would take the lead, which led to some uncertainty about facilitator roles. Assumptions were also made about learners' needs. Additional discussion to ensure a shared understanding of these issues would have led to a more effective learning environment for some individual participants.

## **4. Conclusions - the role of the facilitator**

The effectiveness of the collaborative process in this intercultural setting required facilitators to commit to supporting each others' course outcomes and learners. Findings suggest that in order to support effective collaboration facilitators in similar settings should:

- Find synergies between programmes;
- Design opportunities for manageable and meaningful collaboration involving realistic tasks simplified into
- non-trivial parts (create appropriate task character);
- Motivate participants to 'invest' in the collaborative process (encourage task ownership);
- Provide opportunities for socialisation;
- Facilitate the development of shared cultural understandings;
- Set appropriate expectations for participation and engagement;
- Explore assumptions about teaching and learning approaches (ensure appropriate task control); and
- Share information about facilitation preferences and learner needs.

These actions may support the brokering of dispersed 'local communities of practice into an overarching International Community of Practice' (Cochrane et al. 2011) with further implications for effective international online collaboration.

Whilst the collaboration process was deemed by participants as effective, a number of areas for further development have been identified. These include the enhancement of opportunities for socialisation and cultural exchange over a longer timeframe to support a shared understanding of contexts, and development of stronger relationships to build the relevance of the activity and encourage implementation of lessons. At this stage in the collaboration process, it is also notable that one Scottish participant taught the lesson designed by Finnish peers. This extension of the collaboration beyond the scope of the activity suggests the possibility for scaffolding within online environments as described by Hmelo-Silver et al. (2007). Work is also underway to expand research of the 'proof of concept' process within an action research framework to explore online collaboration to provide intercultural learning experiences.

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