

EXTENDING THE SCOPE OF TELE-COLLABORATIVE PROJECTS

A commentary inspired by Jean W. LeLoup & Robert Ponterio's "Tele-Collaborative Projects: Monsters.com?" (*Language Learning & Technology*, Volume 7, Number 2)

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At its best, the Web provides a stimulating source of language teaching ideas. Indeed, no sooner had I finished reading [LeLoup and Ponterio's article](#), I was browsing Jane Scalpen's [home page](#) and thinking of ways in which tele-collaborative projects like her *Dessinez-moi un Monstre!* (Draw me a Monster!) can be extended through the use of cooperative and collaborative language learning methods. There are two reasons for doing this. First, given a stronger theoretical and practical foundation, language learning outcomes can be more easily set and monitored. Second, from a sound pedagogical base, it is hoped that even greater language learning value can be extracted from the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) used.

To recall, *Dessinez-moi un Monstre!* is a class-based, interdisciplinary project that is designed to exploit the Internet as a medium of interaction. Following the registration of students as participants in the project, descriptions and drawings of a monster are prepared and sent to the project coordinator. Subsequently, the written texts are redistributed to other project participants who are tasked to draw the monster in question from the description provided. Scope is also provided for learners to write descriptions based on original drawings. The project ends with the participants comparing their texts and/or drawings with the creators' originals posted on specially prepared Web pages.

EVALUATION

Students' work on Scalpen's Web site provides evidence of imagination and active participation. *Dessinez-moi un Monstre!* comes across as a fun project that extends the boundaries of the physical classroom by providing a technology-based platform for language practice. However, I am inclined to call projects of this nature "simple" because they are restricted largely to the exchange and sharing of information. I do not mean to criticise these interactions. Rather, my intention is to show how even more can be done to motivate students and give prominence to the language learning aspects of tele-collaborative work.

EXTENDING THE SCOPE OF SIMPLE TELE-COLLABORATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING PROJECTS

The possibilities for extending the scope of simple tele-collaborative projects are grouped below under cooperative and collaborative learning methods. My suggestions build on the *Dessinez-moi un Monstre!* guidelines but they could equally apply to other topic areas and contexts. Assuming that participants are not restricted to producing individual work, my ideas involve them working in small groups.

Cooperative Learning Methods

Cooperative learning methods, as originally conceived by Slavin (1983), provide ways for students not only to be responsible for their own learning but also for that of their groupmates by working towards the achievement of group goals. Kohonen (1992) explains with respect to cooperative language learning that,

since all members ... share a common goal, they are motivated to work together for mutual benefit in order to maximize their own and each other's learning. This creates a positive interdependence among the learners: they perceive that they can reach their goals best when others in the same learning group also do as well as possible. (pp. 33-34)

In order to maximize the learning potential of *Dessinez-moi un Monstre!*, it is necessary to "top and tail" the various activities. This is done by placing them within a larger scheme or unit of work. For instance, prior to the Internet-based practice, classroom language input could involve students building their active vocabulary store of body parts, physical attributes, and so forth. Other preparatory sessions could focus on the organization and distinctive grammar of descriptions. For example, consider the order of adjectives and the use of the simple present tense to refer to a state of being as in the sentence: "My monster has big, red eyes." Once completed, these sessions could provide a meaningful context for the language practiced in the project. They also provide a basis for the evaluation and assessment of the language used in follow-up stages.

The following cooperative language learning scenario involves students from two classes in different geographical locations being assigned to work in groups (e.g., two students from one class, three from another). Individual group members are made responsible for developing different aspects of the written description. One possibility is

- Student A -- physical appearance
- Student B -- character
- Student C -- habitat
- Student D -- diet
- Student E -- pastimes

Once the individual inputs are ready, they can be shared on an electronic discussion board. The group's next task on the discussion board is to negotiate the linking of the various parts, edit, and agree on the final text. Finally, they produce a drawing of the monster that depicts the five separate aspects listed above. At this point, group interdependence is assured because the drawing cannot be produced properly without the students' reciprocal effort. The next stage of the project involves the exchange of texts with other groups in the two classes. Following this, pictures are drawn from the descriptions provided. Clearly, the second group's drawing cannot be expected to be a facsimile of the first, but the original group's written work can be deemed successful if the second drawing includes accurate representations of the monster's appearance, character, habitat, diet, and pastimes.

Collaborative Learning Methods

Although cooperative and collaborative learning methods may appear similar (Bruffee, 1999), collaborative effort places emphasis on "open[ing] up the minds of members of a collaborative team to each other and to the possibilities that lie beyond the reach of any of the individuals" (Mason, 1970, p. 112). Thus, students in collaborative language classrooms are concerned with creating shared understandings. This is only possible when individual group member's inputs combine to produce knowledge that could not have been produced by individuals working alone (Freeman, 1992). Given the increased cognitive load of working collaboratively, the following learning scenario is only considered suitable for mature students.

Once groups have exchanged their materials and seen another group's attempt at trying to recreate their originals, opportunities are then available for groups to analyze the effectiveness of their reading and writing skills. For example, let's say that a group wrote a vivid description of a terrifying terrorist monster and is now looking at another group's graphic representation of their creation. The task is to figure out why the artists failed to capture some features mentioned in the original description. To exemplify this point, let's imagine that part of the original group's text reads as follows (inspired by material available on Jane Scalpen's Web site):

The right arm has a section where the bone is seen, it spreads much blood. It has an axe nailed to the thigh.

These sentences are likely to be misleading although credit should be given for attempting to convey a gory scene! Clearly, somewhere on the right arm a bone is exposed -- but where exactly? Does the monster only have one leg? These questions (and others like them) are ideal prompts for the groups to conduct an ICT-empowered exchange where they help each other repair the text. Hopefully, students (perhaps with some guidance from their teacher) would discover that wounds "bleed" and that the monster has an axe impaled in one of its legs. Further investigations with a thesaurus, for example, could lead to learning new words to describe the flow of blood from a wound (gush, ooze, seep, trickle, etc.).

A further possibility for collaborative work would be made possible with ICT once the groups' pictures and texts are available on specially produced Web pages. This time, individual students could be instructed to review a particular group's work and comment on it by posting a review on a Web Log or similar communication tool. Over time, a body of comment would build up that could help authors and artists assess the popularity and effectiveness of their work. This idea adds a further element of interactivity to the project work and ensures that the materials serve a purpose well beyond their production.

PEDAGOGIC IMPLICATIONS

This is not the place to provide a detailed justification for cooperative and collaborative language learning methods. However, let me take this opportunity to mention briefly two implications for classroom practice arising from the various points made in this commentary. First, extending the scope of "simple" tele-collaborative language learning projects to embrace cooperative and collaborative learning methods involves reframing the roles of teachers and students in the classroom. As MacGregor (1992) points out with reference to collaborative learning, students become (among many other things) contributors, risk-takers, and discussants with a heightened public profile. They are no longer in competition with their classmates but desire to collaborate with them by reaching consensus and learning interdependently. As students enter wider communities of language learning practice through the use of ICT, teachers find that they are sharing control of the class in different ways. Overall, these shifts in responsibilities require time and space to nurture and cannot be achieved easily. That said, when it comes to motivating students to succeed, tele-collaborative projects have, in my opinion, even greater chances of success when they channel students' attention towards challenging tasks that have clearly articulated learning outcomes and scope for problems and puzzles in language use to be solved without constraint.

Second, it should be clear by now that the umbrella term "tele-collaborative," when applied to language learning projects, may not always involve collaborative effort in the way that I have outlined here. To make the distinction clear between simply working together and ICT-enabled projects that add value to students' learning experiences, I prefer to say that in collaborative projects, the learning value of outcomes achieved through collaborative effort is greater than the sum of learners' individual contributions.

CONCLUSION

In this commentary, I used [LeLoup and Ponterio's article](#) as a platform for extending the boundaries of simple tele-collaborative projects. This is possible when students undertake structured learning tasks that require cooperative and collaborate effort. Furthermore, under these conditions, ICT adds value to students' learning when it is used to help them achieve learning outcomes that they could not have attained as easily, if at all, in the physical realm.

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