



## WITHIN THE PROCESS OF COLLABORATION: A GROUP CASE DURING AN ERASMUS INTENSIVE PROGRAMME

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Adriana Pinho Ferreira, Angela Beretta, Emilia Natalia Grygo, Jūratė Grubliauskienė, Virginija Bortkevičienė

### INTRODUCTION

This dissemination paper intends to reflect upon a group experience during a two week Intensive Programme (IP) “Virtual mobility and Learning”, that brought together six Ph.D students from five different countries. It took place in Kaunas, at the Vytautas Magnus University, from June 16<sup>th</sup> until June 29<sup>th</sup> 2013 and the theme was “Virtual Mobility and Learning”.

The group decided to work on the thematic of Collaborative Work (CW), by designing a course for virtual environment therefore one of the main tasks of the IP was designing a course in a virtual environment. Regarding the topic chosen by each person, this group ended up working on CW.

This case study concerns a work group composed of six Ph.D students coming from Portugal, Italy, Latvia, Poland and Lithuania, who worked on the topic of Collaborative Work (CW).

We met in Kaunas, Lithuania, for this Erasmus Intensive Programme (IP) in Virtual Mobility and Learning, objectively to work in course designing for virtual mobility learning.

### THE JOINT VIRTUAL MOBILITY COURSE DESCRIPTION

This part describes the main result of the joint VM and how it was developed. During this Intensive programme “Virtual mobility and Learning” we created the six (6) week course, designed for Master’s degree students with high knowledge of the English language. It is a 3 ECTS credit course.

As a group we were faced with some difficulties in understanding each other and therefore in working proficiently. We were a six member group with different backgrounds, cultures and objectives with regards to the IP. We had also different English language levels, which revealed to be a barrier for group work and understanding.

Starting from Week 0, students and teachers are asked to get familiarized with each other and with the virtual environment. During Week 1 students will be introduced to the topic of CW by working within a theoretical framework. We decided to come up with a preliminary and very simple definition of collaborative work and then we gave the main theoretical references supporting the

need to work together. Taking into account that "Collaboration" is a process through which parties who see different aspects of a problem can constructively explore their differences and search for solutions that go beyond their own limited visions of what is possible, we will look at this topic taking into account the lengths of Constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978; Crawford, 1996), Connectivism (Downes, 2012; Siemens, 2004) and Communal Constructivism. At the same time, there will be moments where students are asked to fulfill group and individual activities, in order to assess them. By the end of this module students should be able to: a) define "collaborative work", "constructivism", "connectivism", "communal constructivism"; b) mind-map the key concepts that founded the previous different approaches; and c) recognize similarities and differences in cultural roots of CW.

In weeks 2&3 students will start to work on different types of collaboration and practical cases in two important fields, such as a) teaching and b) research. The two main tasks proposed are the analysis of case studies and the design of a research paper. For the first one, groups will be asked to: 1) choose a CW within a teaching scenario; 2) analyze it regarding the theoretical background achieved and 3) prepare a lesson to be presented. These tasks require from students not only the ability to work in a group, but also the development of negotiation skills. In the second task students must analyze an article in order to be able to critically think about it and to create a paper from that standpoint. Regarding this, students should be able to: a) analyze cases; b) apply collaboration concepts to real scenarios; and c) use negotiation strategy in groups, about groups and via groups. All proposed activities can help students to find the answer to the question of how they can use and improve CW in their work and everyday life.

With regards to this topic, and regarding weeks 4&5, students are invited to work on different types of CW and practical cases in three work fields: a) Business, b) Public health, c) Art.

Two main tasks in this course were planned: 1) To create a video related to different types of CW in work field. Having fulfilled this, students are asked to divide in groups (5-6 persons in each group) and choose a video (5 min.) related to different fields of work (Health, Business, Art). After that it is very important to promote a group discussion in order to identify: different types of collaborative work; advantages and disadvantages of each type of collaborative work. 2) Students are asked to organize a case study in different fields of interest: business, public health, art. They should make a presentation in groups (15 min.). Moreover, it is also very important that after that presentation students analyze all cases in order to identify and reflect upon the benefits and challenges of CW.

By the end of this sub-topic, students will be able to:

- Identify different types of CW;
- Develop group work skills;
- Recognize several ways of group working.

Week 6 will be dedicated to the supervision of the writing of a final report, where students must critically think on the work developed during the previous weeks.

By the end of the course, students will be able to:

1. Identify different approaches to the definition of CW;
2. Distinguish different types of CW;
3. Develop critical thinking.

## CONCLUSIONS

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The process of creating the virtual mobility course and working in a group of CW, helped us to find out that negotiation is quite a difficult process. The objective of working collaboratively is to create a richer and more comprehensive appreciation of the problem, and also to develop more effective solutions than any individual or organization could develop alone. We can find in constructivism, connectivism and in communal constructivism the main systems of thought able to help us deepen the concept of collaborative work.

Vygotsky's theory is one of the foundations of *constructivism*. According to him, learning occurred in connections between people and the sociocultural context in which they act and interact in shared experiences (Crawford, 1996). *Connectivism* is a learning theory promoted by Stephen Downes (2012) and George Siemens (2004). According to Siemens (2004), learning is no longer an individualistic activity. Knowledge is distributed across networks. In our digital society, the connections and connectiveness within networks lead to learning. Both authors have experimented with Open Courses and both stress the importance of a more open education. Holmes, Tangney, Fitzgibbon, Savage, and Meehan (2001) define *communal constructivism* as an approach to learning in which subjects not only construct their own knowledge (constructivism) as a result of interacting with their environment (social constructivism), but are also actively engaged in the process of constructing knowledge for their learning community.

These were the main concepts that we took into account during the designing of the course.

As a group we experienced some of the barriers identified in this type of international work and collaboration. According to A. Juan-Fuentes (lecture, June 26, 2013), barriers as different academic backgrounds, culture and language levels have a high impact in group performance and collaboration, either in physical or virtual mobility. Regarding this matter, we were able to feel the difficulties of negotiation and collaboration in a physical environment.

Finally, and according to Ritchie (2007), "within collaborative research teams researchers' intersubjectives are made available to the collective for possible subsequent actions as practices are produced and reproduced. During successful face-to-face interactions within teams, researchers experience positive emotional energy and build solidarity that could be stratified to the interactive patterns within the research team" (p. 7).

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Adriana Pinho Ferreira – PhD student on Education; Research Technician in the Research Centre "Didactics and Technology in Education of Trainers" at the University of Aveiro  
ferreira.a@ua.pt

Angela Beretta – PhD student on Life Sciences in the Department of Brain and Behavioral Sciences at the University of Pavia; Teachers' trainer at the Italian Laboratory of Research in Giftedness  
angela.beretta01@universitadipavia.it

*Emilia Natalia Grygo – PhD student on Chemistry at the Jagiellonian University  
emilia.grygo@uj.edu.pl*

*Jūratė Grubliauskienė – PhD student on Educology at the University of Klaipėda  
Public Health specialist  
jurate24@yahoo.com*

*Virginija Bortkevičienė – PhD student at the Faculty of Social Sciences in the Department of  
Education at the Vytautas Magnus University; Assistant and junior researcher at the Science Council  
of Lithuania of the Global grant project  
V.Bortkeviciene@smf.vdu.lt*