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## **DIVERSITY: A BLESSING OR A CURSE FOR ONLINE COLLABORATION?**

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### **Introduction**

Online collaboration and communication through social networks, free knowledge exchange and informal learning online are playing an important role in today's society. Emerging technologies, that are ever-changing, combined with the complexity of the problems that the 21<sup>st</sup> century poses, requires collaborative efforts from people with diverse skills, that are able to adapt and learn whilst working on the problem at hand. These skills are referred to as fluencies (Crockett et al., 2011).

Many educational theorists understand the importance of these fluencies and concur on the same principal: collaboration, digital literacies, citizenship, and the ability to problem solve are all critical skills in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Without these skills the youth today will be unable to adapt to the rapidly changing landscape in a globally connected world (National Education Association, 2012).

In accordance with the above, The European Commission, is promoting various initiatives aimed at increasing training in digital skills for the workforce and for consumers; modernising education across the EU; harnessing digital technologies for learning and for the recognition and validation of skills; and anticipating and analysing skills needs (European Commission, 2016).

For these reasons, the authors, independently and without any prior knowledge of each other, joined a learning experiment: the Open Networked Learning (ONL162: <http://onl162blogroll.blogspot.se>) course for several months in the autumn of 2016. We were randomly assigned to the same Problem Based Learning group (PBL) and collaborated online. Our group, was part of a Community of Inquiry, (COI) consisting of more than 100 students and 25 facilitators. We worked synchronously and asynchronously.

Our motivation for joining the ONL course was common curiosity, professional development and a strong believe that an international learning experiment would provide us with valuable skills needed to succeed in our various professions in today's society.

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As a group we were diverse due to different educational and cultural backgrounds, occupations, philosophies, languages, characteristics that determined our approaches, communication styles, learning styles, as well as previous experiences. Despite this, we agreed on common goals besides achieving the individual ones. In this way we created a synergy and not only did we learn the obvious course content, but we learnt beyond this; we learnt about group dynamics and creativity, as well as how to collaborate despite these differences and how to make these become our strengths.

Therefore, we believe diversity matters when collaborating in an educational context, as it brings to the group the “multi-perspectiveness” that is needed when looking at complex problems (Herrington & Herrington, 2006). Herrington and Herrington (2006), advocate this as an essential learning element when it comes to authentic learning tasks, especially when dealing with online environments. Furthermore, they believe that there are multiple roles to support the construction of knowledge, as it helps to articulate tacit knowledge and make it more explicit. This can only be done through diverse group members, where you have those that are perhaps more expressive, as was the case in our group.

### **Purpose**

Was diversity a curse or a blessing for our group? We were diverse, yet there was commonality as well. How did we balance between togetherness and diversity? We want to share our experience and the knowledge gained with the participants of #EDEN17.

### ***What do we mean with diversity?***

Diversity in our PBL group came from Sweden, Cuba, Sudan, South Africa, Australia, Netherland, five women, two men, young, old, academic, entrepreneur, educator, mom, dad, etc. Some of these differences could be easily noticed, others were subtler. For instance, our learning styles, ability to focus, stress threshold, energy level, diligence or innovative capacity, these were not overtly obvious.

### ***What kind of diversity matters?***

We are going to use the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework as a paradigm. The COI model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) includes the cognitive, social and teacher presence. These elements overlap and contribute to the learning experience. Additionally, we are going to add and discuss the impact of the emotional feedback (Stenbom, Hrastinski, & Cleveland-Innes, 2016).

#### *Cognitive*

*“Cognitive presence relates to the design and development of instructional materials, enabling students to construct and confirm meaning through related reflection and discourse” (Garrison et al., 2000)*

The course design provided synchronous and asynchronous activities for those who preferred discussing in large communities and for those who choose to reflect alone. There was

flexibility and freedom but also good human support and structure, clear instructions and deadlines. Moreover, the ONL encouraged networking. Every member of the group was given the possibility to lead the group and decide over the group presentation, to take notes and schedule meetings. We could choose between different digital tools that suited better our purposes, pace and abilities. We had space and time for self-reflection and for dynamic discussions.

### *Social*

Different cultures, languages, genres, ages, races, religions etc. Some of these components will not impact the group collaboration as much as the cognitive component.

*"Social presence relates to the establishment of a supportive learning community, providing a venue for communication within a trusted environment where students can express individual identities and establish social relationships" (Garrison et al., 2000)*

In this regard, the ONL course design allowed and encouraged networking through membership in the bigger and smaller Google+ communities, tweet chats, Webinars, etc. Networking was important during the course and once the collaboration has been established. Peers' support and positive reception towards everyone's input was also very important for developing relationships and to achieve successful collaborations. While the group contributed with trust, support, inspiration, encouragement, joy, sense of belonging and commitment. And we discuss group rules, for more clearness about online behaviour and communication.

### *Teacher*

Taking the cognitive and the social elements together, this take us back to the COI framework and the third element: the teacher's presence (here referred to as the facilitator's presence). There is a substantial overlap between the three elements but both, facilitator and co-facilitator bring together all the elements in order to have a successful collaborative environment and learning experience. Here, we go deeper into different stages of group process (Wheelan, 2010) and other applying theories.

## **Summary**

The poster will make clear and visible how we think about the following questions:

- Was diversity in our group a curse or a blessing?
- What do we mean by "diversity" (gender, knowledge, skills, access internet, talents...)
- What kind of diversity matters the most in educational context? (social, cognitive, emotional, ...)
- When was diversity a curse? When was it a blessing?
- What was needed to make it a blessing?

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- What is the role of the individual group members for happy online and collaborative learning?
- What is the role of the facilitator and co-facilitator?
- What elements make online collaboration with a diverse group effective?
- Theories applying to our experiences



Figure 1.

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