

171 Creating peer learning spaces in distance education: the case of academic writing

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

In distance education, learning often takes place without collaboration with fellow students. Hence, distance students mostly need to study on their own. The aim of this study is to enhance the quality of distance students' learning processes. An intervention was implemented where a peer-learning structure was tested targeting students' development of academic writing. The intervention consisted of a structure for the creation of learning spaces to enable student-driven collaboration around scientific writing assignments. Theoretically, the study adopts a sociotechnical approach, consequently assuming that the peer learning spaces are social spaces. A sociocultural approach informs the orientation of the intervention, where learning occurs through collaboration and interaction in a specific context. Three aspects of the construction of the peer learning space have been identified: the structuring, the perception, and the experience of it. Going forward, structural as well as social dimensions of peer learning and learning spaces will be investigated.

Full paper

The aim of this study is to enhance the quality of distance students' learning processes. In the study, an intervention is implemented where a peer-learning structure is tested, in this case targeting students' development of academic writing.

In distance education, students usually interact with the technology and learning resources available in flexible ways, historically understood as anytime, anyplace at any pace (Veletsianos & Houlden, 2019). Often such interaction takes place without collaboration with fellow students. Hence, distance students are left on their own to cope with any potential difficulties they face. Studies have shown that a sense of belonging is important for student learning (e.g., Felder & Brent, 2016; Lieser, Taff & Murphy-Hagan, 2018), that a joint creation of social learning environments is crucial (Thomas, 2010), and that an extended view of distance learning environments is called for (Messina Dahlberg, 2017; Messina Dahlberg & Bagga-Gupta, 2015). Consequently, teachers need to consider questions about the distance educational environment and its social dimension, preferably in a direction leading to students developing a sense of community while learning.

An earlier intervention study, where a higher seminar feedback model (Wennergren, 2007) was used, showed that the feedback structure as such was essential in enabling peer engagement and development of academic writing skills (Lindh et al., 2021). Findings of this former intervention also revealed that the creation of peer learning spaces led to a community-like feeling, in which students shared and discussed issues other than writing related ones (*ibid.*). We understand peer learning spaces as student-led learning occasions with interactive potential learning activities.

The study design consisted of interventions, where learning structures were provided to enable pure student-driven collaboration around scientific writing assignments, as a way of creating a peer learning space. The interventions took place in two different consecutive courses in a Strategic Information and Communication Programme in the spring of 2023. Students in these courses volunteered to participate in student-led small group feedback seminars. The seminars followed a well-structured order through a task adapted template, which enabled a clear guiding of the learning process. The template was based on a seminar feedback model (Wennergren, 2007) and was scaled down and adapted to the writing assignments in the courses. A structure like this, linked to the assessment and learning outcomes, is essential for peer learning (Sampson & Cohen, 2016). In this phase of the study, less consideration is taken to peers' learning as socially and culturally situated, i.e., the students are considered as equal parties in their peer learning relations (cf. Boud & Lee, 2005).

Theoretically, the study adopts a sociotechnical approach, consequently assuming that the peer learning spaces are social spaces, in other words, that the form of interaction taking place, though distributed via technology, is considered as social as interaction “in reality” (Van Lieshout et al. 2018). A sociocultural approach informs the orientation of the intervention, where learning occurs through collaboration and interaction in a specific context (e.g., Dysthe, 2003).

The data consists of written accounts from the two courses, both direct answers to an anonymous questionnaire with one question - “Describe your experience of participating in the feedback seminars” - and spontaneous written comments sent to one of the course leaders, who is also one of two researchers following the intervention. A thematic analysis (Terry et al., 2017) has commenced, and currently, we are familiarising with the data, generating codes and preliminary themes.

The data collected so far shows that students who participated in feedback seminars were generally positive. Less positive responses were primarily connected to inactive group members. Initial analysis shows the following tentative themes: a) the role of the template, for example, several students commented that the template was more helpful than they expected – “surprisingly helpful” – and that it provided time management support; b) emotional aspects of learning, for example, the students experienced the feedback on their own text as confirmatory reinforcing a feeling of being on the right track; and, c) collaborative gain, for example, the students highlighted that they understood the writing assignment better through the collaborative set-up where they learnt how other students had interpreted and taken on the assignment.

In conclusion, so far, three aspects of the construction of the peer learning space have been identified: the structuring of it, the perceptions of it and the experience of it. Going forward, we will continue exploring structural as well as social dimensions of peer learning and of learning spaces.

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