IMPLEMENTING ONLINE COLLABORATION IN CLASSROOM

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes the importance of implementing online collaboration in classroom. Some facts have shown that the users of mobile technologies and Internet are increasing exponentially every year. The improvement not only happens in developed countries, but also in developing countries like China, Korea, India, Japan, and Indonesia. Many students are familiar with technologies, as they become parts of students’ daily lives. There are many Web 2.0 tools that students and teachers can use to enhance meaningful activities. Web 2.0 tools also opens possibilities for students to do online collaboration with other students in other schools or even in other countries. Therefore, teachers should use this opportunity to enhance the quality of teaching and learning by utilizing technologies to empower meaningful learning through online collaboration. This paper also provides explanation about how to maintain online collaborative activities. There are three steps. First, choosing the right tools. Second, keeping students’ engagement. Finally, implementing continuous assessment. Further explanation of each steps are discussed in this paper.

Key words: Online collaboration, meaningful learning, Web 2.0 tools

Technologies in information and communication are improving every year not only in developed countries but also in developing countries like Indonesia. This can be demonstrated clearly by the mobile technologies such as smartphones and tablet...
PCs because many companies are in competition to win these markets. As a result, the prices of smartphones are getting cheaper and service is affordable for many people. In Indonesia, there is an increasing number of people that use mobile devices. They use smartphones not only as a tool to make calls or send text messages but also as a tool to access social networking sites, email, browsers, and to download apps. This indicates that social networking, email, and the Internet are no longer new things for them. Bandwidth capacity for Internet access in Indonesia is also getting bigger. According to Safitri (2011) from BBC News Indonesia, from a population of 232 million, 30 million are Internet users, 37 million are Facebook users, 5 million are Twitter users, and 3 million are Blackberry users. The numbers provided are close to the latest data provided by Internet World Stats (2011). Indonesia is the 4th highest in terms of Internet users in Asia after China, India, and Japan. In Indonesia, there are 39,600,000 this year with 38,860,460 Facebook subscribers. If we compare this to the users in 2000, there were only 2,000,000 Internet users. This indicates that there is a significant increase of Internet users in Indonesia from 2000 to 2011 and it will keep increasing in the future. It is important for educators in Indonesia to harness this incredible opportunity and to learn about how to empower meaningful learning through online collaboration that focuses on students rather than teachers.

In Indonesia, especially in big cities, many students have smartphones such as Blackberries and Android devices that they can use to access many services such as Facebook and Blackberry Messenger. Most Indonesian students are heavy users of Facebook and Twitter. They also use Blackberry Messenger as a tool for communication with their friends because it provides unlimited messaging service for all users. It opens possibilities for various ways of collaboration with online multimedia. They can
exchange ideas, share photos and files, update information in Facebook or Twitter, and for some students, do online businesses by using social networking websites. Therefore, those tools are no longer novel things for many students in Indonesia, especially those who live in big cities. This indicates that online communication is a major part of the collaboration that students do outside school.

Over the last quarter century, educational research has accumulated a vast amount of evidence suggesting that one of the most important pedagogical aspects of educational practice is the use of collaboration as a central organizing principle. Collaborative learning is also important for enhancing critical thinking. In a research conducted by Gokhale (1995) of undergraduate students in Industry Technology at Western Illinois University, there was a significant difference between students who learn individually and in a group. The researcher found out that those who studied in groups had higher critical thinking skills compared to those who studied alone. It is concluded that, “collaborative learning fosters the development of critical thinking through discussion, clarification of ideas, and evaluation of others’ ideas” (1995.P.30). Other research in collaborative reasoning also has proven that collaborative learning is effective in increasing reasoning ability. A research study that was conducted by Reznitskaya, Anderson, McNurlen, Nguyen, Archodidou, and Kim (2001) on fifth and sixth graders in central Illinois, proved that “students who participated in CR (Collaborative Reasoning) discussions wrote essays that contained a significantly greater number of arguments, counterarguments, rebuttals, uses of formal argument devices, and references to text information than the essays of similar students who did not experience CR” (p.171). There are many other researchers who have proven that collaborative learning is
a powerful medium for organizing effective teaching and learning that focuses on student and creative thinking. Thomas Friedman (2007) in his book entitled The World is Flat 3.0 gives emphasis to the importance of collaboration for workers and institutions in this present era. Thus, collaboration is one of the critical skills that students have to have in order to be successful in the future.

With the increasing number of Internet users in the world, there is also an increasing number of online applications and Web 2.0 tools that people can use for free for business purposes, education, or entertainment. According to Bonk (2009), “the world is open.” There are 10 openers to the open learning framework. The third opener is the availability of open source and software and the seventh opener is electronic collaboration and interaction. Bonk wrote “This transition to an emphasis on teamwork is perhaps most noticeable because online learning success is often dependent on such skills as communication, collaboration, and conversation.” (p. 249) The thousands of free open source software applications available allow people to communicate and collaborate like never before. Therefore, the tools that are available online open possibilities for students and teachers to engage in online collaboration.

One of the most exciting results of the use of technology in education is the new potential for collaboration using technologies that were unavailable even a decade ago. In a book written by Howard Rheingold (2007) entitled Smart Mobs, he describes the power of collaboration among people with technologies. According to Rheingold, the term “smart mobs” refers to people who utilize communication and computing devices to collaborate with other people to act in concert whether or not they know each other. In the book there are many examples that the author gives. The power of collaboration itself
can be seen not only in modern times where Internet and communication technologies already exist, but also in the past where ancient people relied on symbols or signs to communicate with each other. Complex structures of collaboration were created by our ancestors to build civilizations, pyramids, skyscrapers, and empires. Without collaboration, those things would not exist. In the present, Rheingold gives an example of how revolution occurred in Manila in 2001 because an organized demonstration happened when people forwarded text messages to many citizens to overthrow president Estrada (2007). All these examples describe the power of collaboration that most people do not realize yet, although the Arab Spring technology-enabled revolutions are increasing global awareness of this power. (Pearson, 2011)

After realizing the power of collaboration in this world, it is time for educators to think about empowering collaboration in school for effective teaching and learning. Sometimes as teachers we are afraid to let our students work on their own because of the possibility in our minds that they will not learn anything. However, in collaboration, teachers should put their trust in students to be creatively maintaining their own learning. Teachers should be no longer control the learning and start to empower meaningful collaboration for achieving successful learning where all students achieve progress in learning. Perhaps, some people may think that this is too idealistic to be practical. There is an interesting insight from AdoraSvitak, a 12 year-old-girl who spoke at the TED Conference in 2010 about “What adults can learn from kids.” She said:

"Now, I do most of my speaking in front of an education crowd, teachers and students, and I like this analogy. It shouldn't just be a teacher at the head of classroom telling students do
this, do that. The students should teach their
teachers. Learning between grown ups and
kids should be reciprocal. The reality,
unfortunately, is a little different, and it has a
lot to do with trust, or a lack of it”

It is true that in this modern era there are many teachers
who do not believe in or notice students’ talents or potentials.
Especially in a developing country such as Indonesia, teachers
tend to have more power than students. This leads to a learning
culture where teachers are the masters and students are the
followers no matter if the teachers are right or wrong or if the
students are learning anything. Therefore, to break this teacher
centered learning environment, teachers should empower online
collaboration in their teaching and learning processes by using
Web 2.0 tools.

With the availability Web 2.0 tools, students will be
encouraged to collaborate not only with their friends in their
class, but also with their friends in other classes. Teachers can
also create online collaboration with students at other schools.
For example, MacInnes, a third grade teacher at Washington
Street School, connected her class to third grade classes in all the
50 states in the USA by using Skype, Google, and iChat (Harrison,
2010). In the process of learning, students exchanged
information about each state in the USA. This kind of
collaboration can provide new experiences for students and
teachers to have free collaboration by using technology. Online
collaboration can embrace new learning experiences that can be
done for free. With the availability of free Web 2.0 tools such as
Skype and other video conferencing tools, teachers can invite
local community members such as farmers, doctors, or
businesspersons to have collaboration in certain projects that may improve lives in their community. Students will learn from experts in their local city about certain issues and try to find solutions for the problems. Teachers also can invite experts from different parts of the country or even in different countries to have a videoconference through Skype. Not only in a country, but also internationally collaboration can happen. For example, in an English class, students can learn to improve their writing skills by having an e-pal. Teachers can write an email to a school in a different country to have an electronic pal program where students can use email or blogs or other Web 2.0 tools to exchange information.

There are three main steps that teachers have to know in order to maintain online collaboration activities. Choosing the right tools for online activities is the first step for successful online collaborative learning. There are many Web 2.0 tools that teachers can use to facilitate online collaboration. One example is Second Life. This is a fun and powerful tool that students can use to interact with other people in different parts of the world by using voice and text. They can synchronously talk and share ideas in this virtual world. However, it requires high-speed bandwidth and computers with compatible graphic cards. In this case, this can be done in a school that has good infrastructure and high capacity of bandwidth speed. Wikis and blogs are other common tools that students can use to collaborate in writing. Students can give comments on papers or contribute ideas in a blog. All students can have privilege to edit the page. Google docs are also powerful tools for collaboration that students can use to share files in a form of word documents, PowerPoint, Excels, drawings or pdf formats. Students can create, edit, and work on a project together. Google docs can increase efficiency in file sharing and collaboration over different kinds of document.
formats. Students can use Youtube, Vimeo, and other Web 2.0 tools to share videos. Another video sharing tool that students can use is Jaycut where students can collaborate on a video project.

After deciding the right tools for an activity, the next step is, teachers have to think about how to keep students’ engagement in the activities. There are many important factors that can influence students’ engagement in online collaborative learning. One of them is familiarity with the tool. Instructors should teach the students how to use collaboration tools before using them for teaching and learning activities. In the five-stage model of online learning developed by Gilly Salmon (2007), the first stage is individual access and the ability of participants to use an online tool. Access and motivation are the basic steps of online learning activities. Students can easily get frustrated if they have difficulty in mastering the tool. Bonk & King (1998) even recommended an initial training day. Instructors also have to provide clear course plans and due dates, and provide an initial assignment that should be submitted early so that students get a chance to test their mastery of the tool and courseware system. This will also help instructors to address any problems earlier. Another thing that teachers should know about keeping students’ engagement is that building a sense of community among students and with the teacher is essential. A study that involved 2036 students from 23 states who enrolled in online classes at University of New York showed that students’ sense of community in online learning increased when there is active presence of instructors in learning (Shea, P.J., 2006). In this case, teachers should take a role as e-moderators who can be catalysts for effective collaboration by asking the group further questions without giving students the answers. Many times online activities fail because instructors cannot facilitate good communication and
discussion among students. The next factor that can increase students' engagement is clear vision of the final product of the collaboration. Students should have a clear idea in mind about things that they will create and achieve at the end. One of the most powerful ways of helping students envision the final product is to ask them many questions about their vision, and to get them to ask each-other questions about their shared vision. If the activities are project based, the project should be built based on meaningful and authentic real world problems. By realizing those important factors, instructors can create effective online collaborative learning.

The third step of maintaining collaborative activities is continuous assessment. Web 2.0 tools keep logs of students' works. Students and teachers can access the works anywhere and anytime. Direct feedback from peers and teachers can be given directly. Self and peer assessment are an important part of assessment in collaborative activities because during the learning process students will learn from each other. Thus, students should learn how to assess themselves and their peers. Self-assessment and peer assessment can be done through reflection and feedback that is written by students themselves or by their own peers. This does not mean that instructors will not take part in giving feedback on students' work. In the future, students can compile all of their online work with all feedback and reflections into an authentic product that can be assessed.

Some people think that it is impossible to apply online learning in Indonesia because schools in Indonesia have limited Internet capacity. However, based on the fact that there are exponential increasing numbers of people who use the Internet in Indonesia every year, especially with mobile communication, it will be a good opportunity for educators to empower meaningful learning towards online collaboration. This online collaboration
will create student centered learning environments. In order to maintain collaborative learning activities, instructors need to find the right tools for online collaboration, increase students' engagement, and apply continuous assessment.

REFERENCES


