Collaborative learning in e-learning

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Introduction:
GOH: welcome to this lecture about collaborative learning in e-learning. My name is Grete Oline Hole.

AKL: And my name is Anne Karin Larsen, and we both work at HiB. In this short lecture we will speak about collaborative learning in e-learning. We will present some thoughts about collaborative learning, talk about why this is important, and discuss how to stimulate collaboration in e-learning. We will also present ours and others research about how to enhance collaborative learning among e-learning students.

GOH: Yes, what is collaborative learning? All over the world we have seen a shift towards collaborative learning methods. This is due both to a new understanding of how people learn and also an awareness of what is the best way for students to achieve the knowledge needed for future work.

Speaking of collaborative learning we think about problem-based, case-based learning, group-work, discussions, reflection and other ways in which students are an active part in the learning process.

In this lecture we will tell you how to stimulate collaborative learning in an e-learning course. Traditionally online courses are constructed in a way that does not stimulate interaction and cooperation. This is why the e-learning often is seen as individual and lonely.

We believe in learning as an interactive process where students have to discuss, reflect, collect and analyze information – and are active partners in the community of learners. Important aims of the courses in VIRCLASS have been that student should learn from each other and share information and knowledge about their own country.

Our experience over 5 years shows that it is possible to stimulate activities, cooperation and collaborative learning among students from different countries even in an e-learning setting (Larsen et al 2007, 2008).

AKL: **How do we do this?**
In all teaching there is never only one way to do things. We will share with you some tools and methods we have found useful to stimulate collaborative learning in e-learning.

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When starting a course, the first thing to do is to make an open, friendly and inviting atmosphere. By offering students a prestart week to learn to navigate in the virtual learning environment (the VLE) and presenting tutorials which help students to navigate in the platform they very soon manage the technical part of their new learning situation.

Then the participants are ready for their self presentations. An invitation from teachers is presented on the bulletin board as well as a short video in which the teachers present themselves. The use of pictures from their local surroundings and glimpses from both their professional and their private lives gives a personal touch to the atmosphere in the classroom.

Students present themselves with a digital photo and a short description of who they are and what they expect from the course.

In our experience an online chat in the first or second week is important. Students feel themselves to be part of a group in the same classroom when meeting each other online in a synchronic (at the same time) discussion forum.

Today many tools for online discussions are available. We have tried different chat facilities. Our main concern has been that it should be easy for all students to access the chat and it should not require any extra equipment. When having an international group of students the computer facilities are diverse and we do not want to exclude anyone from participation.

GOH: What you have been speaking about now Anne Karin is very important aspect for us to create a good learning community.

AKL: Yes, this is true! But it is not always so easy because we have seen that one of the difficulties when arranging international e-learning courses can be that students have holidays, exams and heavy workloads in their own institution which makes it hard to follow a strict time schedule in an extra course. Even when trying to solve this by integrating the e-learning course as part of their main curriculum we are not always able to avoid these problems.

However one way to reduce these problems is to structure the weekly programmes so as to give assignments over a longer period than one week to enable students to find time for collaboration.

What we try to do is to give the student a chance to plan their work by giving them an overview at the beginning of all the weekly programmes, tasks and readings. They are then asked to make their own work schedule at the beginning of the course.

We have good experiences of using audiovisual triggers and a video case to start discussions about commonalities and differences both in the theme discussions and in the online chats (Larsen et al, 2007). Social work as a profession is highly related to context and it is therefore

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motivating to see how people experience and perceive the same information differently depending upon their diverse cultural backgrounds.

Peer-feedback takes place in which students comments upon each others' work. This is another way to stimulate collaboration and it is also a good motivator for learning.

We have found transparency to be an important way to stimulate peer learning. This means that student' products and assignments are presented in their e-portfolio, which is open for everybody to read and comment. Also the teachers' feedback is available for all students.

GOH: I wonder Anne Karin, if students and teacher were familiar with this way of working or not?

AKL: Well, in the beginning both students and teachers found this unusual and challenging. But after we had tried it for a while, students understood how much they can learn from each other through this openness. This has led to collaboration among teachers and many discussions about how to give feedback in a good and instructive way.

GOH: OK; thank you!
But I have another question: Is it important that the teachers structure collaborative situations for the students? Or will students collaborate by themselves, because they want to do so?

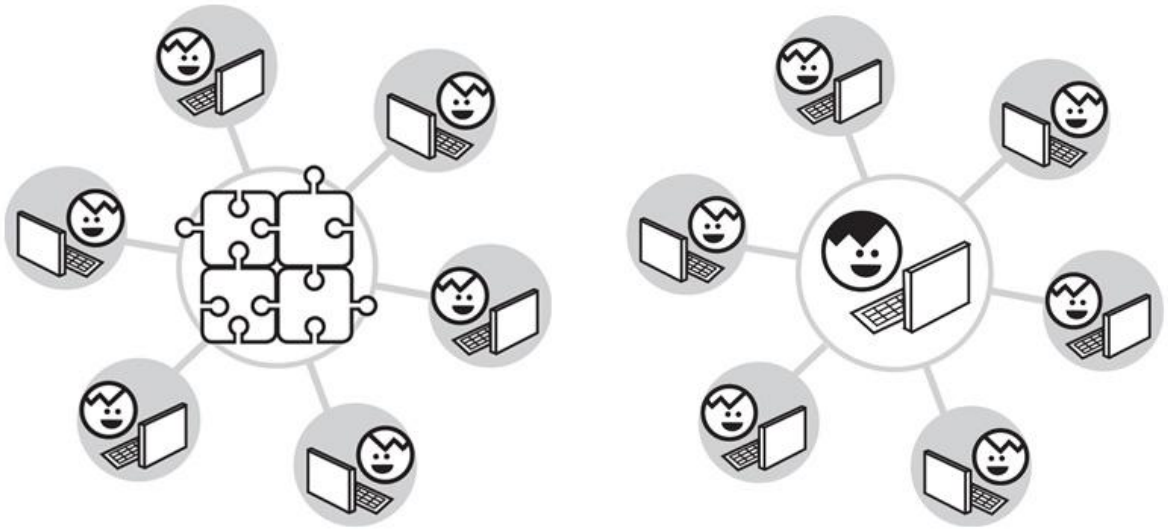
AKL: Well this is an interesting question and central to how we arrange e-learning courses, I think. What we have experienced is that when students meet the expectation of collaboration from the very beginning of the course they also continue to collaborate when this is not instructed by the teachers and the program. In some classes the self-directed collaboration and communication is very high, and not only related to the professional matters, but also to more personal issues-- like when they share the death of a grandma or a holiday experience or what music they like. And from the response they get from other students, we can see that this is a good arena both for learning and socializing. Nevertheless, we know that many students are very busy. We believe that there also is a need for a defined time schedule and clear expectations for cooperative work.

We have also found that authentic tasks requiring collaboration stimulate communication beyond what is directed by the teachers.

When speaking about tasks Grete Oline, when making the tasks we must be aware of the difference between collaborative learning and cooperation.

GOH: Yes, that is true! And I have a good drawing which I think can illustrate this.

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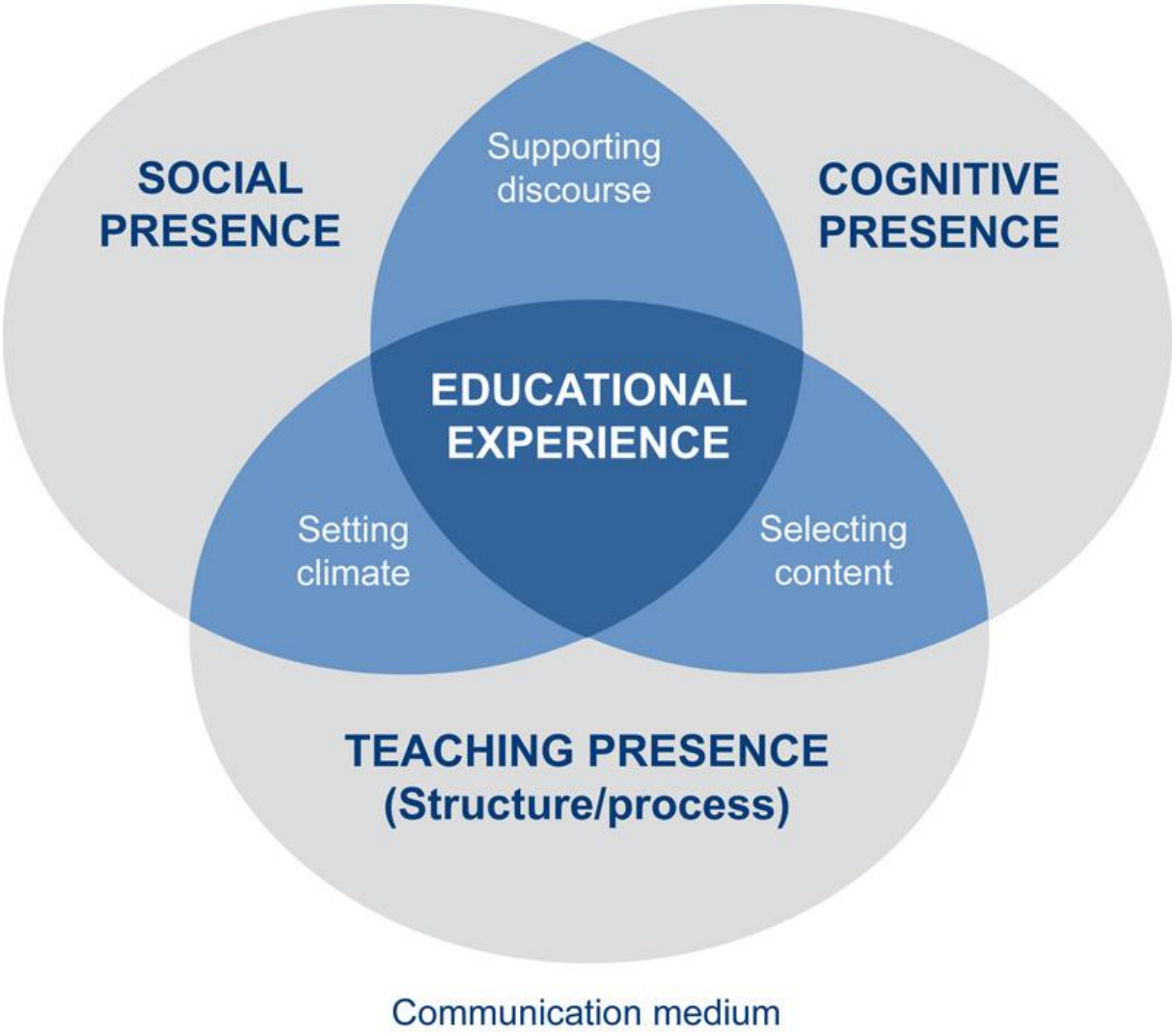
When you look at the picture here; it is easy to see that when students *cooperate* they solve small tasks on their own, as parts of a jig-saw puzzle. But then they have only learned from what *they* have done, not from other students work. We have seen that when we give students authentic tasks where they have to share knowledge, they discuss, and create a new understanding and in this way they increase their knowledge. That is an example of *collaborative* learning.

AK: This is interesting. Have you found any research supporting collaborative learning?

GOH: Yes we have some literature that we have found important for our work.

When we try to develop a 'community of learning' this is influenced by the social cultural approaches to learning and the theory of communities of practice by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991). Also the research and writings of Terry Anderson and Randy Garrison (2003) presenting the 'community of inquiry' has given us useful ideas.

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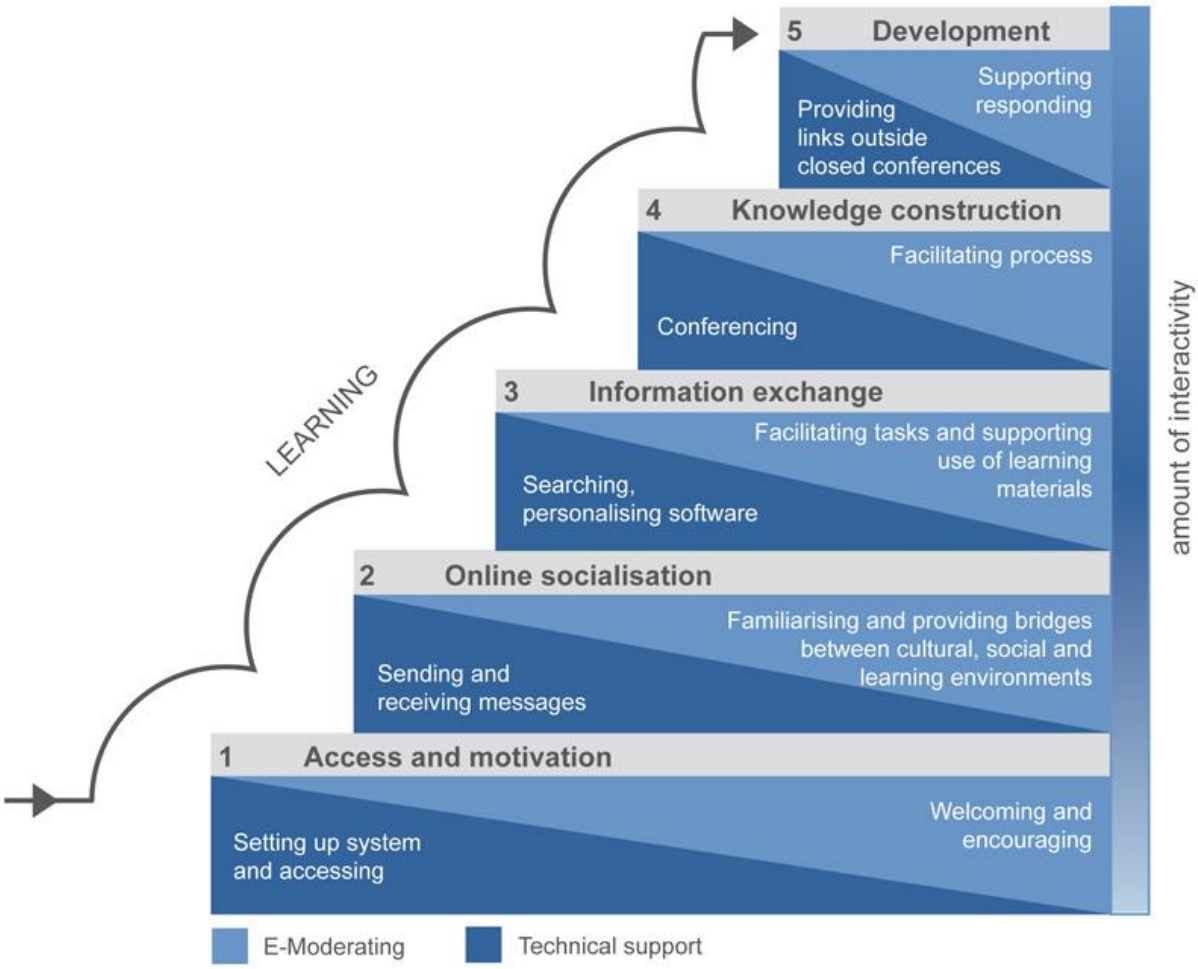
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As you can see from their figure, last presented in their recent book, factors important for students educational experience are what they call social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence.

Social presence has directed our work with students and teachers presenting themselves on the platform sharing professional and personal experiences. By making a good structure and facilitating discussions and chats as well as open feedback to students we have experienced the importance of *teaching presence* which has promoted learning. This has also been important for setting the climate for learning. Through giving students authentic tasks for comparative work they are challenged to develop and co-construct knowledge which we understand as *cognitive presence***.** This is also important to achieve deep learning. The peer support among students and open feedback from teachers makes a bridge between social and cognitive presence, supporting dialogue and critical reflections.

Another important researcher for us has been Gilly Salmon (2004). Her model of the *stages* in *becoming an e-learner* clarifies the teacher's role and responsibilities to meet the student's needs along the learning process.

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AKL: What you are saying here Grete Oline I think is a good summary of what we have been doing in our courses and speaking about in this lecture. Looking at the stages, we have started with *access* and *motivation*. Then students have to be *socialized in the virtual classroom***,** and they are able to start to *exchange information* with others. This allows for *knowledge construction* and then they are ready to *develop* their competences.

Thank you for listening and we wish you good luck with your further collaboration.

Readings

Garrison, DR & Anderson, T (2003) *E-Learning in the 21st Century. A Framework for Research and Practice.* London and New York, Routledge Falmer.

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