KUNSKAPSBYGGE PÅ NÄTET

En studie av studenter i dialog

Av

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AKADEMISK AVHANDLING
Title and subtitle
Knowledge construction on the Web: A study on students in dialogue

Abstract
This thesis investigates students' dialogue and collaboration when working in small groups in a networked course. The aim is to describe and shed light on students' dialogue and collaboration in a computer-mediated communication working with a problem-oriented task. Thus, the interest lies in students' engagement in the learning situation rather than on the learning outcomes.

The research was carried out in 'natural' settings, as part of a computer-supported course involving 120 students in 25 groups working for 5 weeks. The course was taken by teacher students in Mathematics and Science during their first year. The students used a web-based learning environment.

The study analyses the dialogue from three out of the 25 groups when working with tasks dealing with ethical conflicts in connection with the exploitation of natural resources. Observation was used as a method of collecting empirical material. The observational data gathered is students' interaction in discussion forums and chat from networked communication from each group.

Three studies were carried out. The interest in the first study is the dynamic condition in which the dialogue takes place. The second study focuses on the resources students are using in the dialogue. The third study has two different but parallel foci: the dialogical quality of the separate utterance and the students' use of each other's utterances.

In sum, all three groups are developing an extensive dialogue. However, despite the fact that all students are taking part in the dialogue some are more central than others. Obviously, timing is a crucial factor. A late submission doesn't receive responses. The interaction is co-task when groups are using the synchronous forum. The synchronous chat is used as a space for private and social talk. Intensive use of the chat has a positive effect on the dialogue in the forum. This suggests that social interaction is a key feature of constructive collaboration in networked courses.

The students refer to sources both inside and outside the group. A positive feature is the potential for knowledge building shaped through the richness of resources brought into the dialogue. However, external references are often vague value statements. The students are referring to specific knowledge to a low extent. When they do, their utterances do not elicit responses. A statement representing an authorisation voice is accepted not commented.

The utterances made by the students can often be characterized as multivoiced and open. However, the dialogues change from periods of a tentative and open inquiry to periods with a more closed interaction. During the closed periods of the dialogue only few utterances builds on each others context and external resources are not used. The students give account for their own position, develop their own ideas, and pose questions more to themselves than to the group as a whole. One can conclude that it is not enough with multivoiced and open utterances to create a knowledge building dialogue. The task itself functions as strong motivating fuel and the wish to pass the exam might be stronger than a genuine knowledge building interest.

Key words
Case study, collaboration, computer assisted instruction, CSCL, dialogue, groupwork, higher education

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