

## CROSSING ACADEMIC DOMAINS: CREATING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT IN FACULTY TEAMWORK

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Why is it that people, no matter who they are, find working in groups or teams dreadful? How many times have we collaborated with a colleague and thought afterward, “Now, that was an enriching experience, one that I would like to repeat”? One reason for the discomfort might be that unlike citizens from communities with different first languages who use a *lingua franca* to transact business, faculty members do not have a common language in which to communicate across their respective academic cultures. The following paper takes a look at the process that two college professors from different disciplines underwent to develop and carry out a project by creating a learning environment in which both faculty members attempted to acquire the language and culture of the other in order to accomplish the task at hand. It is the account, to use Vygotskian terminology, of *experts* from two academic domains co-descending to *actual levels of development* during the course of the project in order to *scaffold* the learning of a so-called second academic language and culture for the *novice* other.

### PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The project initially consisted of converting an existing face-to-face course to a hybrid, or blended, online course. The project directors were a professor from Language and Cognition and a college Librarian—an expert in information literacy, technology and management. It was at this point that the two faculty members began to bring together their two content or skill areas (i.e., ESL and library research) using collaborative software (e.g., podcasts, blogs, wikis) and other computer-mediated communication tools available through Blackboard, the online learning system.

The redesigned project set out to modify a presently offered face-to-face course by integrating computer literacy, information literacy, and second language learning into a blended online course. The selected course—ESL 036, Contemporary Issues for ESL Students III—is a content-based course, which uses as its primary instructional text, along with other media-generated sources, *The New York Times*. Students explore contemporary issues and their historical context while expanding their vocabulary and developing their linguistic and critical thinking skills. They learn to recognize the author's point of view, distinguish between news reports and editorial commentary, and interpret related charts and graphs.

This course was chosen in part because the objectives align with the library's information literacy goals. Hostos Library's mission focuses on its Information Literacy Program, which teaches students to locate, access, and evaluate information resources in a variety of formats, as well as research strategies, and plagiarism awareness. The Information Literacy Program's goals complement those of ESL 036. Students would apply information literacy skills as they evaluate news articles from a variety of sources.

In addition to integrating content and skills in an online learning environment for urban adult second language learners, the project also put forth creating an online forum for ESL faculty members interested in online instruction to discuss ideas and classroom materials. The overarching purpose was to foster the development of learning communities among the ESL students as well as the ESL instructors through the use of collaborative software available through Blackboard courseware.

#### **CREATING A LEARNING ENVIRONMENT**

Working together on a project that unites two areas of study required that the team members have a general understanding of each other's discipline-specific terminology and associated concepts in order to discuss the practices and materials of each domain and integrate the two areas into a cohesive course. Because neither professor had the basic knowledge of the other's area of expertise, it fell to both to become learners of the other's academic domain. The best way to describe how this learning environment was formed and maintained by the two team members is to examine the dynamic retrospectively within a Vygotskian socio-cultural perspective—namely, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and its connected concepts of expert/novice relationship and scaffolding.

Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist and pedagogue who lived from 1896 to 1934, was the originator of Social-Cultural Theory. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) derives from his work and refers to that space between what a person can do on his or her own and what he or she cannot do on his or her own. It is the zone in which the learner, or novice, can do the task only with the help of an expert. The ZPD is the area between actual competency and potential competency in which learning takes place. Working alongside the expert, the novice gains mastery of the task until he or she no longer needs the expert's help to accomplish it. The role, then, of the expert is to support, or scaffold, the learning process for the novice. As

the learner gains mastery, the scaffolding fades away until it is completely removed and no longer needed because the novice can do the task independently (Johnson, 2004; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Vygotsky, 1989).<sup>1</sup>

In the case of these two professors, each had to give up her role of expert to become a learner. While this may seem easy, it is not easy to assume the novice role when one is accustomed to and even enjoys being the expert by having mastery over the content (i.e., information, culture, and language) and its delivery system. Yet, to work in a team that brings together experts from different areas of expertise with the idea that interdisciplinary work yields innovation—be it curricular or other—the experts must acknowledge their respective lack of competency in other domains and allow themselves to descend with the other to their current and real level ability. This joint co-descending to instruct the other is not easy because it takes effort and time on the part of both people. It is difficult to teach and learn a new culture and language while trying to complete a project. Nevertheless, this is the best condition for creating a mutually active and participatory learning environment for professional growth to take place.

The information was delivered in a highly interactive manner, through question and answer at moments when the information was needed to move the project forward—this is to say, content and language were acquired simultaneously within a purposeful social and interactional context. Small skill-practicing assignments (e.g., setting up an Instant Messaging account to meet online) as well as quick research assignments on leading theories and practitioners in their respective fields were periodically given by each professor to the other in order to extend, solidify, synthesize, and assess the learning taking place. The use of scaffolding, then, in the form of discussion, modeling, and inquiry, recognizes that the task is worked on as a whole and that the individuals involved, expert and novice, co-construct a learning environment in which to achieve their aim. Identifying the zone of the novice's proximal development (i.e., ZPD) and scaffolding the learning that needs to take place within that zone is the conscious/unconscious, explicit/implicit dynamic that occurs between team members from different academic domains in an effort to successfully accomplish a project that sets out to be interdisciplinary.

## CONCLUSION

Although the faculty members accomplished their initial goal and created a Blackboard site that included wikis, discussion boards and video, the faculty members realized that the process of integrating both information literacy and new technologies into an online course is ongoing. As technology evolves, and as the instructors responds to student feedback, the two faculty members have pledged to collaborate in the future.

Like their second language learners, the two faculty members from different disciplines were able to cross linguistic boundaries to make the experience of working on a team not only fruitful, but also one that they would repeat. The project provided the opportunity for each professor to explore her own as well as the other's academic

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domain within a co-constructed learning environment. This mutually engaging and participatory learning environment was described using Vygotsky's concept of ZPD with its related notion of novice-expert scaffolding. Future empirical research might analyze discourse practices associated with team-member scaffolding strategies, while team-member satisfaction on interdisciplinary projects might also be investigated. In short, the two college professors found that working on a team can become more comfortable and more successful when team members, experts in their own academic domain, acknowledge that part of the project process entails becoming communicatively competent in a new academic language and culture. Becoming academically bilingual and bi-cultural only acts to make one stronger and more flexible professionally.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 For Further information, see: Johnson, M. *A Philosophy Of Second Language Acquisition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004; Lantolf, J. P., and G. Appel. "Theoretical framework: An introduction to Vygotskian approaches to second language research." In *Vygotskian Approaches To Second Language Research*. Ed. J.P. Lantolf and G. Appel. Westport, CT: Ablex Publishing, 1994. pp.1-32; Senge, P. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art And Practice Of The Learning Organization*. New York: Currency/Doubleday, 2006; and Vygotsky, Lev. *Thought and Language*. Rev. ed. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989.