

e-Collaborative Learning Circles

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Abstract—In this paper, we introduce an e-collaborative learning circles methodology which utilizes the information and communication technologies (ICTs) in e-educational processes. In e-collaborative learning circles methodology, the teachers and students announce their research projects on various mailing lists and discussion boards using available ICTs. The teachers & moderators and students who are already members of the e-forums, discuss the project proposals in their classrooms sent out by the potential global partner schools and return the requested feed back to the proposing school(s) about their level of the participation and contribution in the research.

In general, an e-collaborative learning circle project is implemented with a small and diverse group (usually 8-10 participants) from around the world. The students meet regularly over a period of weeks/months through the ICTs during the e-collaborative learning process. When the project is completed, a project product (e-book / DVD) is prepared and sent to the circle members.

In this research, when taking into account the interests and motivation of the participating students with the facilitating role of the teacher(s), the students in each circle do research to obtain new data and information, thus enabling them to have the opportunity to meet both different cultures and international understandings across the globe. However, while the participants communicate along with the members in the circle they also practice and develop their communication language skills. Finally, teachers and students find the possibility to develop their skills in using the ICTs as well.

Keywords—Distance Education, Online Learning, Web Based Learning, Learning Circles, e-Collaborative Learning Circles

I. INTRODUCTION

INFORMATION and Communication Technologies (ICTs) have changed our way of approaching to education and we want to portray what is happening about ICTs in e-collaborative learning and teaching across the globe [1]. Scientists and educators from all over the world take part in e-collaborative activities, open their doors to their partner schools, work together online, improve research, learning and teaching skills and celebrate the project work.

In this paper, we will discuss the methodology by which teachers and students are enabled to use the (ICTs) to engage in e-collaborative research and educational projects that both enhance learning and make a difference in the world [2]. Thus, teachers and students will explore the internet as data gathering and exchanging needs & experience.

II. DEVELOPING E-COLLABORATIVE LEARNING CIRCLES

What is an e-collaborative learning circle? An e-collaborative learning circle offers people the opportunity to learn together by providing a cyberspace / or medium where

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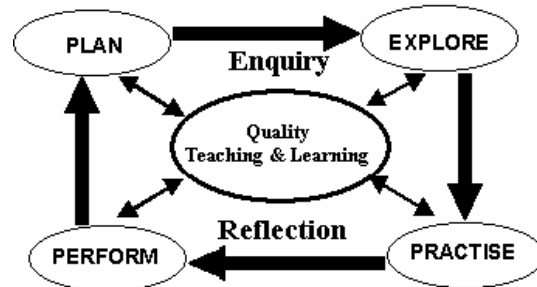


Fig. 1 e-collaborative learning circle model

the group decides what it would like to achieve and how to work towards those goals in a self managed way using the ICTs. In other words, e-collaborative learning circles are groups that meet at specific times (and for a finite number of cyber meetings) for discussion /or research of a specific topic on the internet. e-collaborative learning circles are led by a facilitator, whose function is to help the group's discussion and research to remain on course, to assist more passive members in being active, and to assist the group in its collective communication. How does an e-collaborative learning circle differ from a discussion group? The distinction between e-collaborative learning circle and a discussion group is not great, but there are three common differences:

- an e-collaborative learning circle is often more focused than a discussion group.
- an e-collaborative learning circle is based on common resources which may not be the case with a discussion group.
- an e-collaborative learning circle is intended to have action outcomes - which may not be the case with a discussion group.

The features of e-collaborative learning circles:

- are small, diverse group (8-10 people),
- meet regularly over a period of weeks/months,
- set ground rules for a respectful, productive discussion,
- are usually led by a facilitator who is impartial but helps to manage the deliberation process,
- look at an issue from different points of view,
- act as a vehicle to discover, share, and express knowledge,
- start where people are and encourages growth,
- involve a spiraling process of reflection and action.

The e-collaborative learning circle sets its own terms of reference and ground rules to determine how it operates on the internet. This may include things like how often to meet and expectations from participants. An e-collaborative circle may have a facilitator, or may choose not to, or to rotate this task amongst its members. It should provide a cyberspace where members can interact creatively and freely to consider relevant issues, sharing individual experiences and providing and gaining support from each other.

We are greatly keen to promote e-collaborative circles as a way of developing learning and teaching skills amongst the special interests groups. The e-collaborative circles are intended to complement existing forums, rather than replace them, and have their own unique characteristics. It is important to recognize that, while each e-collaborative learning circle will have its own purpose and remit, it should also ensure that the learning that takes place is accessible by other members, while ensuring the confidentiality of the group is maintained.

III. SETTING UP E-COLLABORATIVE LEARNING CIRCLES

There are many ways to set up an e-learning circle on the internet. A group of individuals such as teachers and students might realize they have some common interests which can be explored and developed by coming together on the internet. This could be the result of attendance at a seminar, conference, working group or while surfing on the internet. The facilitator/or moderator may receive requests to explore a topic which could best be done by an e-collaborative learning circle and support setting this up using the ICTs.

IV. EXPECTATIONS OF E-COLLABORATIVE LEARNING CIRCLES

Although e-collaborative learning circles are generally self-managing, participants may need support from time to time. The facilitator/moderator will generally be able to provide:

- a venue,
- some facilitation support, particularly to help establish the group,
- help with dissemination of outcomes, e.g. reports, case studies,
- support with the implementation of other activities as a result, e.g. a workshop, seminar or other project.

In return e-collaborative learning circles should be able to offer: e-collaborative learning circle outcomes which can be shared with other members, e.g. through a report, set of principles on a topic, guidance notes, best practice approaches to an issue, running of a workshop or seminar, etc.

V. THE FIVE MAIN PHASES OF E-COLLABORATIVE LEARNING CIRCLES INTERACTION

There are five main phases of e-collaborative learning circles interaction on the internet:

- 1- Preparing for e-collaborative learning circles
- 2- Opening e-collaborative learning circles
- 3- Working and Learning Together
- 4- Planning the Outcomes
- 5- Closing e-collaborative learning circles

A. Preparing for e-Collaborative Learning Circles

Usually participants will have some common needs that can be met through an e-collaborative learning circle. However, they may have quite diverse individual needs too, and it is important to share expectations to check whether these can be met through this process. This can take place before the group meets, perhaps through e-mail, chat, forum, videoconferencing or phone conversations, or as part of the opening session. Potential participants need to be able to decide that the group is not for them, or that a different approach would better meet their needs. It is important that participants 'self-select' to join the group to help ensure their commitment and willingness to participate. Once this process is complete, the membership should generally remain the same for the duration of e-collaborative learning circle if possible. This maximizes the learning potential of the group on the internet. As a general guide, a group between 8 – 10 participants tends to work well together, but this does depend on the objectives and needs of e-collaborative learning circle.

B. Opening e-Collaborative Learning Circles

When the group meets for the first time, there are a number of important issues that need to be addressed. Although each group is different, these issues are likely to include:

- agreeing the purpose of the group, if this has not been finalized: why are we here and what we want to achieve. This may also include activities after the group formally ends,
- setting terms of reference, which define the specific activities the group might undertake and the parameters of its remit,
- setting ground rules. These might include:
 - how often the group will meet, where and when,
 - defining confidentiality, acceptable behavior, e.g. level of attendance expected, etc,
 - whether to have a facilitator or not, and whether this is a shared role,
 - expectations of each other between meetings e.g. level of contact, activities to be carried out,
 - defining specific roles individuals might carry out,
 - links with other groups/organizations,

C. Working and Learning Together

e-collaborative learning circles work in very different and varied ways. This creativity and flexibility means e-collaborative learning circles can promote learning in a way a training course with a pre-determined program cannot. As participants, this way of working can be quite different to

more traditional ways of learning. It is important to be prepared for such a different approach. Although e-collaborative learning circles can be more creative and innovative, this can also bring frustration and difficulty as objectives might change frequently. Things which seemed certain and agreed at the last meeting might be completely changed at the next meeting. This can be a challenging way to work, and you may decide that it is not appropriate for you.

In terms of actual activities an e-collaborative learning circles might undertake, the possibilities are wide and varied, and it is up to the group to decide how best it wants to achieve its overall purpose. Some examples are:

- whole group and/or sub-group discussions,
- participants presenting case studies of their individual and/or organizational situation, with peer assessment and feedback,
- high level of disclosure of personal and/or professional perspectives on issues.

In addition, the group might agree that all or some members undertake activities between sessions. These might include:

- research on topic areas,
- preparation of reports,
- activities within and/or between organizations.

It is important for the group to agree expectations and timescales for activities between meetings. It is easy for more regular activities to overtake these when members return to the workplace. It can be difficult to prioritize learning activities when colleagues and managers are making demands in other areas. Learning is often seen as a 'luxury' activity, only to be done when other tasks have been completed. Members need to be as honest as they can about what they can and cannot do between meetings.

Communication between meetings can also be useful. The group might decide to swap phone numbers and e-mail addresses. They might also agree suitable times for contact. It is important that this option is available, particularly if unforeseen events mean a member can't complete an activity in time for the next meeting, or isn't going to be able to attend. Such disappointments can become disruptive if the e-learning collaborative circle only finds out about them at the next meeting. The group might decide to appoint someone as a main contact point to co-ordinate communication between meetings.

A key part of the learning process is recognizing when something isn't likely to meet your needs. Since e-learning collaborative circle can revise its purpose and objectives, it may be the case that some members decide their needs are not going to be met, and that they need to leave the group. While difficult, this is an essential option to have available. It does not mean the e-collaborative learning circle has failed, and members who choose to leave may have other options

open to them to meet their needs. They may set up another e-collaborative learning circle with a different purpose.

D. Planning the Outcomes

The e-collaborative learning circle needs to consider what outcomes it is working towards when it plans its activities. One reason we support e-collaborative learning circles is that lesson learning and outcomes can be shared with members beyond the circle. It is important that the lessons learned can be shared with a wider audience in order to maximize the learning that has taken place.

There are many different ways of sharing learning. Some examples are:

- a report on key lessons shared among the group;
- a briefing paper or guidance notes on a particular issue;
- case studies or models to illustrate good practice on an issue;
- a set of questions for members to ask themselves, or guidance notes on how to achieve best practice;
- plans for a joint-agency project;
- a position statement to take forward to a meeting or consultation;
- an event or workshop.

Participants need to agree what outputs would help facilitate learning outside the group. For example, running a workshop might be a good idea in theory, but if the issue is too specific to be of general interest to others, this may not be an effective method to choose. We will endeavor to support the sharing of learning amongst members and beyond, and can provide advice on ways of doing this.

It will be easier to co-ordinate the outputs from your e-learning collaborative circle, if a record has been kept of interactions and learning that has taken place throughout the lifecycle of the project. You might find it useful to produce a summary of the process as one of your learning outputs (e.g. what worked, what didn't, and why) which will help to consolidate your own learning, and may assist people involved in future e-collaborative learning circles.

E. Closing the e-Collaborative Learning Circles

e-collaborative learning circles usually meet for a pre-determined length of time, e.g. one semester or school year. This helps maintain a focus on the learning participants want, but the group needs to be able to extend or shorten its life if necessary. Once the purpose of the group has been achieved, it is useful to consider how to end the group. Some things to consider might be:

- Have we actually achieved all we set out to do?
- Is there anything else we might want to consider doing?

If there are other things the group might want to do, and the commitment is there, consider how to do this. Carrying on the e-collaborative learning circle may not be the best option. Also, consider whether the group is looking for other things to do to avoid closing the circle and ending what has been a productive and enjoyable process. If the group agrees that carrying on the e-collaborative learning circle is the right option, take some time to agree the new parameters and to reflect on how the group has worked together to this point. If the group decides that the e-collaborative learning circle has come to a natural end, then it is useful to consider:

- How can we evaluate what we have done together?
- What lessons can we learn from our time together? - consider how we have worked together, what we could have done differently, what worked particularly well. This may include reflecting on collective and individual perspectives, e.g. peer feedback might be useful.
- Do we need to do anything to close the group, e.g. a particular activity within the e-learning collaborative circle or going out for a drink or a meal together?
- Are we going to maintain some form of contact, e.g. by e-mail? This may be useful if outcomes are being implemented within members' organizations, and additional support might be needed. However, even if no other activities are taking place, further contact can still be beneficial.

We are highly keen to support e-collaborative learning circles as much as possible, and sharing your learning on how you worked together would be as useful as any specific outcomes produced.

F. e-Collaborative Learning Circles Meetings

There is no reason why an e-collaborative learning circle needs to meet in person. Meetings can be held via e-mail and/or web discussion rooms or using other ICTs. This greatly expands the potential for e-collaborative learning circle to link individuals from a diverse range of organizations and, of course, to promote south/north learning. The principles and processes outlined above are essentially the same, but the logistics of running meetings in this way also need to be considered. This might include:

- choosing an internet provider which offers a good level of back-up support to deal with any technological difficulties,
- having back-up options available if contact isn't possible e.g. teleconferencing,
- considering how discussions are recorded for future use,
- how to ensure everyone is involved. It is easier to opt out of the group when you are not all in a room together. Having a nominated facilitator with this role might be useful.

The organizing institution may be in a position to offer financial support for this way of working, as well as some facilitator input if needed.

VI. CONCLUSION

In this paper, e-collaborative learning circles are introduced to complement existing forums, rather than replace them, and have their own unique characteristics. The e-collaborative learning circles are in place in educational processes in many schools around the world. For instance, the World Links for Development Program (WorLD)[4] sponsored by the World Bank was implemented between 1998 and 2002 school years in the 22 pilot high schools of the Ministry of National Education in Turkey [5]. These WorLD schools have greatly benefited from the e-collaborative learning circles methodology both in finding global partners and carrying out their projects. It is expectation that other schools (primary or secondary) in their quest for excellence in education will benefit from this experience of the WorLD schools.

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