Collaborative Learning in the Cloud: A Cross-Cultural Perspective of Collaboration

Liana Razmerita and Kathrin Kirchner

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Collaborative Learning in the Cloud: A cross-cultural perspective of collaboration

Kathrin Kirchner  
Berlin School of Economics and Law  
Alt-Friedrichsfelde 60  
10315 Berlin, Germany  
+49 30 30877 2411  
kathrin.kirchner@hwr-berlin.de

Liana Razmerita  
Copenhagen Business School  
Dalgas Have 15  
2000 Frederiksberg, Denmark  
+45 38152182  
ir.ibc@cbs.dk

ABSTRACT
This present study aims to investigate how students perceive collaboration and associated technologies used to collaborate. In particular, we aim to address the following research questions:

- What are the factors that impact satisfaction with collaboration?
- How do these factors differ in different collaborative settings?

Based on data from 75 students from Denmark and Germany, the article identifies factors that impact positively and negatively satisfaction with collaboration.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

General Terms
Human Factors

Keywords
collaboration, group work, collaborative learning

1. INTRODUCTION
Collaborative learning is an important pedagogical tool used in modern higher education. “Collaborative learning describes a variety of educational practices in which interactions among peers constitute the most important factor in learning, although without excluding other factors such as the learning material and interactions with teachers.” [1] The “digital natives students” or “millenials” are multitasking, operating at “twitch speed” [2] in multiple modalities using mobile pervasive cloud technology and social media on regular basis. Social media is based on Internet and cloud computing technology that “allows users to easily create, edit, evaluate, and/or link to content or to other creators of content.” [3] Collaboration may be organized through both traditional face to face group work or through online learning using e-collaboration via various cloud services. Cloud services have a big potential for expanding collaborative learning through both real time collaboration and social interaction [4, 5]. A new set of collaborative tools available in the cloud are supporting different collaborative/operative or learning processes:

- multi-user collaborative writing like Wikis (e.g. Wikipedia, Wikiversity, Wikimedia,), GoogleDocs or editing simultaneous notes, lists and ideas using Pads (e.g. TitanPad, SimplePad)
- communicating, sharing and social interaction using social networking (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Podio) or instant messaging (e.g. WhatsApp)
- file sharing or document sharing (e.g. Dropbox or GoogleDrive)
- brainstorming and structuring of ideas like Mindmaps (e.g. Mindmeister, Freemind)
- sharing links and bookmarks using Social Bookmarking (e.g. Delicious, Digg)
- media sharing including video streaming or presentations using content communities (e.g. Slideshow, YouTube)
- computer-intensive e-learning services (e.g. Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCS), virtual worlds, simulations)

Collaborative services are the most potential applications for achieving collaborative learning that can be used to assist students in accomplishing a collaborative or cooperative learning task [5]. The aim of this study is to investigate collaborative learning and technologies associated with learning in the cloud adopted by student to support collaboration. In particular, the following research questions are addressed: What are the factors that impact satisfaction with collaboration? How do these factors differ in different collaborative settings?

2. RELATED WORK
A variety of approaches and interpretations to collaborative learning exist [1] (e.g. online collaboration [6], cross-cultural virtual teams [7], case-based learning [8]). Despite these different approaches, these studies agree on the benefits of peer interaction that stimulates knowledge production and cognitive gains [1, 9, 10]. However group work has many dependent variables and factors that influence group performance [11, 12] and satisfaction [13]. In particular the quality of learning is highly dependent of characteristics of the group [11, 14]. The literature related to motivation and collaborative learning shows that students’ performance and learning depends not only to interest in the subject but also to the relation to peers, individual differences, personality traits, cultural backgrounds, gender differences, classroom as a learning environment [7, 11, 12, 14].

Based on an extensive literature review, the main benefits and affordances of cloud computing for education have been
identified and discussed [15]. The main listed benefits are: availability of online applications, flexibility to create learning environments, support for mobile learning, computing intensive support, scalability and cost savings in hardware and software.

3. RESEARCH METHOD AND DATA
Our study employs a survey research design. Based on the literature review, a questionnaire was developed in previous study [12, 13], that was revised and extended. The questions focused on students’ perception of collaboration and e-collaboration. The last version of the questionnaire consists of 22 questions covering areas like general collaboration within the group, the support of knowledge processes, the challenges of group work, as well as the role of e-collaboration via cloud services (e.g. social media). Most of the questions used a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). In order to get additional insights and enable student to comment regarding the group work, some open questions were included in the survey.

The data was collected through an online survey, distributed at the end of the semester. Data was collected in two different courses, at bachelor level, one at Copenhagen Business School (CBS), one at Berlin School of Economics and Law (BSEL) in 2014 and 2015.

The course “Web Interaction Design” has run as an elective course at CBS in Spring and Fall 2014. The participating students were Danish bachelor students from different study programs as well as exchange students from all over the world. Students conducted research on a selected topic of interest, developed research ideas collaboratively and collected data in group. At the end of the course, student groups presented their results and received feedback on their work so far. The collaborative work was the starting point for their individual student projects.

Furthermore, data was collected from German Information Systems bachelor students of at BSEL in Spring 2015. The students were enrolled into a “cooperative” study program that means that they work all in parallel for a company and gain practical experience in addition to their theoretical knowledge. These students attended a mandatory course in “Management of complex software systems”. They worked together in groups on a case study over the semester. Although the case study tasks were assigned, some degrees of freedom allowed integrating their own ideas. Similarly to the previous case, the results of group work were presented at the end of semester.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS
Altogether, we have collected answers from 35 students at CBS (out of 92 participants) and 40 students (out of 50 participants) from BSEL. In total, our sample includes 75 valid responses, among which we have 42 male students (56%) and 33 female (44%). During the group work, students could freely select what collaborative tools they use. In the course at CBS, Podio, a social media-enhanced platform was used for providing course related materials, sharing information and interacting with the students. In the BSEL course, Moodle was used for similar purposes. Figure 1 shows the different usage of collaboration services. Facebook and Dropbox were the most preferred means of collaboration in both settings. Additionally to Skype, Prezi, GoogleDocs/Drive, and few students used WhatsApp and email.

![Figure 1. Usage of collaboration tools at BSEL and CBS](image)

Furthermore, we have investigated the overall satisfaction of students in relation with their collaboration. As it can be seen in Figure 2, in the BSEL setting students were more satisfied (mean=1.68, SD=0.694) than in the CBS case (mean=2.31, SD=1.078). A T-Test showed a significant difference (sig. 0.003) between the two groups.

![Figure 2. Overall satisfaction with collaboration](image)

The “not so good” experience of some students at CBS may be explained due to the fact that some groups had experience conflict -“disagreements about approach to the subject” and therefore some groups split-up or some members left the group before finalizing the group work. Group work is not a mandatory task at CBS as students final grade depends only on their individual performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>General Collaboration</td>
<td>Enjoy collaboration with peers</td>
<td>1.91</td>
<td>0.918</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Collaboration effect on learning and inspiration</td>
<td>2.49</td>
<td>1.143</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Equal contribution of team members</td>
<td>2.31</td>
<td>1.208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Help to enhance project ideas</td>
<td>2.01</td>
<td>0.979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support of knowledge processes</td>
<td>Creating Presentations</td>
<td>2.09</td>
<td>1.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Learning new perspectives</td>
<td>2.48</td>
<td>1.005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inspiring new ideas</td>
<td>2.51</td>
<td>0.991</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enhancing social interaction</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>1.155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Helping individual project work</td>
<td>2.56</td>
<td>1.068</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1 presents an overview of the different factors influencing collaboration that have been considered in the survey. These factors have been clustered into six different groups, namely “general collaboration”, “support of knowledge processes”, “collaboration challenges”, “general e-collaboration”, “e-collaboration use” and “social media advantages”. All factors were ordinal, measured on a Likert scale from 1 to 5.

![Figure 3. Influencing factors on satisfaction with collaboration in the CBS setting (n=35)](image)

**Table 1.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collaboration challenges</th>
<th>CBS (n=35)</th>
<th>BSEL (n=40)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helping in data collection</td>
<td>2.44</td>
<td>1.265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Loafing</td>
<td>3.68</td>
<td>1.210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of coordination</td>
<td>3.27</td>
<td>1.212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of trust</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>1.053</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict</td>
<td>4.19</td>
<td>0.968</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Different backgrounds of team members</td>
<td>3.92</td>
<td>1.112</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural differences in the team</td>
<td>3.61</td>
<td>1.218</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**5. DISCUSSION**

Even though collaboration settings are different in terms of backgrounds (students, tasks, type of group projects) most of the influencing factors are common in both settings.

In both cases, variables from the clusters “General collaboration” and “Collaboration Challenges” were significant influencing factors on the overall satisfaction with the group collaboration. In both settings, “enjoy collaboration with peers” had the highest impact, although at CBS, the Rho value was higher (0.986) than at BSEL (0.742). In the cluster “Collaboration challenges”, four factors were the same in both settings, although at BSEL, “lack of trust” played a bigger role than at CBS (despite the fact that students know each other since 3 years). Interestingly, the factor “different backgrounds” played only a significant role for the BSEL group, but not for CBS students. The might seems strange, because BSEL students have known each other since three years and they are more homogeneous, as they all belong to the same study program and CBS students are more heterogeneous - as they come from different study programs or countries. But, BSEL students had different practical knowledge and experience due to their practical work in different companies. Therefore, some of them had already some experiences with the topic covered in the case study for the group work.

For CBS students, factors from the cluster “support for knowledge processes” (including factors such as: learning new perspectives, enhancing social interaction, creating presentations) played a
significant role, while it was not the case for BSEL students. That might be due to the fact that the project task for in the CBS setting was more open and students had the opportunity to be more creative.

On the other hand, for the BSEL students, factors from the group “social media advantages” were significant, while this was not the case for the CBS students. In the BSEL setting, students had to do a case study with several tasks. According to their feedback, they separated the tasks among team members and later aggregated the results and define a red threat using social media tools. Students were not prescribed to use specific collaboration tools. Furthermore the student at CBS are not graded for their group presentation and class participation and therefore some students are not that motivated to participate in the group work and presentations. BSEL students are graded based on their students’ presentations and group report.

In a previous study [13] that examined the students’ satisfaction with group collaboration, based only on data from CBS student from 2011-2012 we found seven significant impact factors. The relationship to peers (“enjoy collaboration”) was found to be the most significant fact that impact satisfaction as well as “equal contribution of team members”. Among the challenges identified in a previous study were: social loafing, lack of coordination and lack of trust, which are the same as in this study. The present study identifies some additional factors (such as conflict) and how these factors are influenced by specific collaboration setting and context.

6. SUMMARY AND OUTLOOK
Cloud computing has the potential to expand collaborative learning and teaching. The article has investigated the most important factors that impact collaboration satisfaction with group work in two different classroom settings with students working on different collaborative tasks, in two different countries. The study has identified critical factors that impact students’ satisfaction with collaboration. The study findings contribute to a better understanding of how to promote successful collaboration and of a better understanding of challenges that students encounter in their teamwork. Collaboration and group work skills are important for business school graduates as organizations demand employees to have strong interpersonal and group work skills. These skills are particularly important in an economic environment that is increasingly complex, rapidly changing and global.

7. REFERENCES