

ACADEMIC READING ON A COLLABORATIVE, ONLINE PLATFORM

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ABSTRACT

Academic reading circles can be adapted from in class to an online platform where students can work collaboratively. This paper outlines how reading circles are used online with Second Language Learners. A description of the stages and necessary roles is provided.

KEYWORDS

Academic reading circles, collaborative learning, online collaboration, constructivism

1. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Government run universities in the UAE are moving away from teaching English for General Purposes and moving toward supporting students with academic English at both the pre-sessional and in-sessional levels. Faculty who teach content-based courses often give students academic tasks that are beyond their language abilities. As a result, students arrive in class without completing the required reading or the coursework. In-sessional faculty have reported that instead of facilitating students' learning, they are spending a large amount of time covering the materials students should have studied outside of class. The following paper will describe an approach used to encourage students to read outside of class collaboratively through online tools and reading circles.

Collaborative learning is an educational approach to teaching and learning that involves groups of two or more students working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. While Dillenbourg (1999) emphasizes that this definition does not encompass all aspects of collaborative learning; this is the most flexible definition for our purpose. Daniels (1994) coined the term "literature circles" as small temporary discussion groups who have chosen to read the same poem, story, article or book. The aims of these circles are to make reading more manageable and less overwhelming, to expose students to different reading strategies and to encourage learner autonomy. Seburn (2016) argues that there are three components to the academic reading circles: the text, the group with each member given a responsibility and the group discussion. According to this model, the group consists of the following: (1) the leader (facilitator), (2) the contextualiser (explains the who, what, when, where and why - can be recorded), (3) the visualiser (uses and develops graphical interpretations), (4) the connector (connects concepts with real-world situations), (5) the highlighter (facilitates vocabulary comprehension (Seburn, 2016).

One way to collaborate in reading circles is through online collaborative tools such as wikis and online writing tools. These are seen by many educators as a way to enhance collaborative learning (Binbin 2015). This aligns with the reflective and collaborative nature of constructivism. Through online collaborative tools, learners reflect and build knowledge collectively (Parker & Chao, 2007). Kessler and Bikowski (2010) found that second language learners were able to increase learner autonomy and practice their writing through online collaborative tools. Collaborative learning online can be assessed using two different methods. For one, students can be assessed by their peers. De Wever, Van Keer, Schellens and Valcke (2011) had success with peer assessment using rubrics that targeted contribution, sources, discussion and social behavior. Teacher rubrics are another method used to evaluate collaborative work (Lai & Ng, 2011).

2. CONSIDERATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

When implementing reading circles online, there are a number of factors that need to be addressed. The overall implementation should be mapped using principles of instructional design such as the ADDIE model. (ref) Starting with a clear analysis of the program needs: Why is this needed? Where are the current gaps that this program would address? For our program, the students are second language learners and therefore the reading texts (which come from textbooks that are in English) are difficult for students and reading circles helps with students better analyze texts. Also, our students have a limited time on campus. Therefore, an online venue is an appropriate choice for our specific population. After the analysis phase, the program needs to be designed to outline exactly what will be included based on the program and student needs. For this phase, specific texts will be targeted and chosen and a timeline created. Also, a firm outline of what will be included in the online learning reading circles and how it will be assessed is needed. We bypassed this important step when developing our program, which is unfortunate because it would have been useful and clarified roles and tasks. The next step is developing the materials. We did this but not in a systematic way with a clear design. After this step, is the implementation phase, which is self-explanatory. The program would be closely monitored to determine and note any issues that arise. When we implemented our program, it was not systematic and addressed only ad hoc needs that came up. The final step is evaluation, this could be evaluating the program as a whole and/or evaluation of students understanding of the materials. For our program, we sent out a survey to the teachers but we did not include the students and also we did not check students' understanding of the materials to determine if the online reading circles were effective.

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