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Deployment of collaborative assessment to improve educational outcomes at university

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Abstract

This small-scale project presents the results of a phenomenographic study which has been conducted to explore the variations in students' perceptions of collaborative e-assessment via a social networking site (SNS) to understand how academic performance of students can be improved. The learning process is viewed through the networked learning theoretical framework. The data was gathered using a series of semi-structured interviews. The data analysis resulted in the outcome space consisting of four categories: motivational, ethical, technological, and psycho-pedagogical dimensions. The study describes the foci within each category. The discussion section provides an insight into the strengths and limitations of collaborative e-assessment via SNSs and addresses the challenges of deploying SNSs into the educational context in the university. These aspects if considered can be used to improve learning outcomes of students' academic performance that is mediated via social networking sites at university. Overall, the outcome space with four categories can inform teachers' choices in designing and implementing SNS for collaborative assessment to improve learning outcomes of students. The study contributes to the field of research by providing an alternative way of describing the students' experiences and presents a holistic view on students' perceptions of collaborative e-assessment via SNS for

academic IELTS training. This perspective moves away from just good or bad experiences of students (McConnell 2002). The future research can be directed to analysing such interaction within the university educational environments using other methodological approaches.

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Keywords

Students' perceptions, phenomenography, collaborative e-assessment, social networking sites, university.

Introduction

Collaborative assessment has been the topic for research for many years as the idea of involving learners to the processes of -self assessment and peer review has always attracted the research attention of educators [McConnell, 2002]. With proliferation of information communication technologies, the education has moved from the instructivist paradigm to constructivist approaches to the ideas of connectivism as current or future trends in education [Gerstein, 2014]. Collaborative assessment is transferred to networked learning environments performing the same functions but being mediated through technology [McConnell, 2002]. Social networking sites as web2.0 technology create virtual scaffolding learning communities where such collaborative goal-oriented practices can take place. Much emphasis should be placed on better understanding of the conditions that can nurture transformative changes in learner's experiences, increase collaborative knowledge generation and improv educational performance in general [Lyashenko, Malinina, 2015].

The paper presents the methodology and findings of a small-scale qualitative research that was conducted in Nizhny Novgorod National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE). In 2017 HSE adopted the Conception of development of foreign English competence according to which the students of all programs and faculties should reach B1-B2 (CEFR) and be prepared to pass an external exam IELTS (International English Language Testing) with participation of external certified examiners. The students can get an access to the materials of the curriculum via (learning management system) LMS. However, there is no solution suggested at an institutional level for creating learning opportunities for students in out of university learning context. So, it was decided to launch a learning community in Russian SNS IELTS Writing activator as a crash course (short-term for one module within the program). This research focusses the idea of exploring learning outcomes of the students engaged in collaborative e-assessment of essays and graph descriptions (Academic IELTS format). The rationale for creating a virtual learning community for collaborative assessment was twofold:1) to scaffold students' writing via collaborative assessment and to improve performance through better understanding of basic IELTS writing strategies and requirements; 2) engage students in collaborative assessment and explore their experiences of doing it. The research focus is on meaning making and describing various conceptions of the students' experiences within the SNS to understand how the technology can be deployed to improve overall academic outcomes [Koschmann, 2001].

Literature review

Key words and phrases for an advanced search terms were identified as collaborative e-assessment, students' perceptions on collaborative assessment, formative e-assessment, collaborative e-assessment in higher education. The electronic databases such as Google Scholar, One Search and E-library were deployed, and the literature search was bound within the higher education context within the last two decades since the emergence of web 2.0 technologies including social networking sites as a type of social media. The other inclusion criteria were the English and Russian languages, English language teaching via technology and peer reviewed sources of literature. The scope of the research was not to conduct a systematic literature review but identify the gap related to exploration of students' various experiences of using SNS learning community as a platform for collaborative e-assessment in IELTS academic writing.

Formative E-assessment and collaborative practices. With the proliferation of different forms of ICT, learning processes have undergone transformations through shifting to more student-centered, collaborative approaches and implementation of ICT into teaching and learning. Learner centered approach and collaboration are included in the list of 10 European principles for the enhancement of learning and teaching. The above-mentioned principles underpin e-learning which can take variety of forms and serve different purposes. There arises the necessity to transform assessments using technology [Ripley, 2004]. Classroom assessment tends to become more personalized and tailored to the needs of students at a macro level within higher education context when the teacher can "pace instructions" to provided intended learning outcome [Ripley, 2004; Bennett, 2011]. Positive and encouraging examples of effective deployment of e-assessment into teaching practices are described in the critical report by Ripley (2004) where some gaps are identified. Firstly, e-assessment needs a pedagogically driven model. Secondly, the project mainly used e-portfolios, transformative marking and pairs approaches, virtual worlds etc. Social networking sites have not been mentioned in the report by Ripley. Despite almost a decade that has been passed since it was published, social networking sites are still not considered to be a platform for e- assessment. The literature review conducted in 2011 has revealed the fact that there is a trend to reconceptualize e-assessment in nontraditional learning spaces in higher education [Gikandi et al., 2011]. However, the emphasis is still placed on teachers' experiences and online tools such as discussion forums, e-portfolios, and quiz tools. The key studies identified in the review are related to collaborative learning and online formative assessment, but SNS have not been deployed as educational tools. There arises the need to conduct more empirical research about (i). students' experiences regarding the deployment of SNS for collaborative assessment (ii). factors influencing such interactions in nontraditional forms of formative e-assessment and the changes students can observe because of these activities in informal settings [Bennett. 2011; Gikandi et al., 2011; Goodyear, 2016; McConnell, 2002]. The latest critical review of current and future trends in e assessment puts an emphasis on the trend towards informal practices and social media creation [Perrotta, Whitelock, 2017].

SNS as a platform for networked collaborative e assessment in foreign language learning. Social networks have attracted much research attention as educational technologies facilitating student engagement and providing a platform for academic-related collaboration [Akbari et al., 2016]. It is argued that educational potential of SNS should not be underestimated as they provide a variety of opportunities for collaborative learning, interaction, and interactivity such as blogs, discussion boards, chats, direct messaging, commenting, sharing resources etc. Facebook, Twitter have been dominating the research domain because students go beyond "structured academic support" to embed personalized

networks to formal learning to communicate with peers, share resources, get feedback, and interact [Evans, 2013]. The recent research proves high level of SNS acceptance as a learning tool increasing student engagement and motivation [Akbari et al., 2016]. However, it is necessary to consider e cultural differences in the use of SNS. "One-fits-all strategy" is no longer sustainable in the globalized multicultural context. More localized or customized solutions are expected to satisfy cultural diversity and sensitivity [Baran, 2009]. According to the research, Russian SNS Vkontakte is perceived as more useful, trustworthy, and enjoyable than FB. Despite its popularity among the young, Vk.com has not been studied as well as FB. The search in databases Google scholar and One search Lancaster university has helped identify a gap in research interest mainly focused on political or cultural issues. Small amount of papers is devoted to exploring this SNS for educational purposes: social media in higher education [Sapargaliyev, 2014]; learner identity [Klimanova, Demobvskaya, 2013]. The previous literature review has resulted in little published data on using SNS as a technological solution for IELTS collaborative e-assessment. Besides, there is the evidence pointing to the research niche where qualitative methods of examining students' experiences are described There is a scarcity of the documents reporting rich qualitative descriptions of students' experiences of technology enhanced learning and more research is needed to examine how groups of learner's experiences and perceive the relationships between technology and learning and what factors transform students learning [Kirkwood, Price, 2014].

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for the research is networked learning (NL). This framework is chosen as it encompasses the variety of collaborative interactions that can occur within an educational setting mediated via SNS: between learners, between learners and tutors; between learning community and its resources [Goodyear, 2005]. Besides NL is concerned with deployment of readily available public technologies (such as SNS) which are not designed for educational purposes [Jones, 2015]. For this research a starting theoretical point was viewing knowledge creation through multiple formats of collaboration among the members of a SNS. The nature of learning happening in a social collaborative space such as a SNS can be defined as a networked learning (NL) type which is quite distinct from e-learning commonly used talking about computer mediated environments [Jones, Steeples, 2002]. NL is based on collaboration and connectedness and can be defined as the following:

Learning in which ICT is used to promote connections; between one learner and other learners; between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources [Goodyear, 2005, 83].

NL offers a non-linear perspective to learning and is related to "phenomenographic tradition" [Jones, 2015] which views learning through "the different ways in which people experience, interpret, understand, apprehend, perceive or conceptualize various aspect of reality" [Marton, 1981, 178]. NL as a theoretical framework enables to explore collaborative e-assessment as a multidimensional phenomenon that can be studies through a phenomenographic approach. In this regard pehenomenographic approach [Marton, 1981]. A phenomenographic perspective would be a new form of inquiry aimed at finding out and mapping the qualitatively different ways of learners' experience to improve collaborative skills and create more favorable pedagogical conditions for greater engagement. Given the theoretical framework and the gap in the literature review the *Research question* can be formulated as the following:

What are the variations in students' perceptions of collaborative e-assessment via a SNS in IELTS

writing training course?

Methodology. Phenomenography as the research approach in this study is aimed at discovering the qualitatively different ways of experiencing the phenomenon under analysis. The description presents variation in human meaning, understanding, conceptions or ways of experiencing [Marton, 1981; Akerlind, 2005]. The approach is underpinned by the assumption that different categories of description are logically related by a way of hierarchically inclusive relationships and the totality of these categories denote to a collective intellect but not the individual differences. Following the approach, the categories represent the outcome space as a structured set that will illuminate the phenomenon holistically. The aim of the research is to explore qualitatively the range of meanings within a small group of learners who have experienced the collaborative e-assessment mediated via a SNS community.

Research Context and Sample

The context of the research was a learning community IELTS writing Activator in Russian social networking site VKontakte. The participants are 2nd year students in HSE. The students are from three various faculties (Management, Economics, IT) who have a good command of the English language (intermediate and upper intermediate levels). As a part of the curriculum the students are supposed to pass IELTS test at the end of the year. According to the programme English classes are conducted only as an optional discipline and once a week. There is a need to arrange extra training support outside a traditional classroom format. So, the learning community has been deployed in SNS with a certain practical rationale: i). to help the students better understand how to improve their writing in IELTS in order to meet the criteria and get higher grades (assessment of their and peer writings): ii). to create extended writing classes using available and tested technology (SNS) as a platform for collaboration and e -assessment of different modes (teacher- peer- self); iii). to explore how the chosen technology impacts students and their experiences and their perceptions. They are invited to join the group on a voluntarily basis. The motivation for joining and the potential learning benefits along with the design of the learning community were explained in advance and one week was given as a trial period to decide on joining or not. The collaborative activities are arranged for a fixed period time (the first module from September to November) and after the first screen writing test the data was collected. The participants were purposefully selected to achieve maximum variation of experience of collaboration: varied patterns of participation/ collaboration in the SNS learning community were considered such as:

Core participants: those who upload papers and share feedback regularly (twice or once a week)- high level of participation.

Learners who upload and share feedback with lower frequency (less than once a week)- medium;

Lurkers-learners who are the members of the community but do not contribute to collaboration in any other way-low.

This selection strategy is in line with a traditional phenomenographic assumptions identifying a small number of variants – typically 4 or 5 relatively limited number of qualitatively different ways of experience [Marton, 1981].

Data gathering

This stage of the research started after the end of the 1st module in HSE when the students wrote the first IELTS diagnostic test. The participants were sent a special consent form via the same SNS community and were offered to go either through face-to-face interviews or provide written feedback in any language they will choose (Russian or English). If they agreed to participate, they should text

back to the researcher and identify what form (oral or written) and what language would be preferable for them. Interview format (oral and written) was chosen as a typical data gathering strategy associated with the phenomenographic research approach [Bruce, 1994]. The questions for the interview were made up in advance to allow the respondents the possibility to describe various meanings and conceptions of their collaborative e-assessment. The main focuses of the questions were on asking the participants to describe the general understanding of the learning task, the approaches used, comparison with the previous experiences, the conceptions. A set of analytical categories outlined by McConnell (2002) were used to structure the conversation such as: appropriateness of collaborative assessment: collaborative assessment as a learning event: the focus for assessment. They are adapted for the research focus of this study and will be presented as a probing list of open- ended questions grouped into six sections following Marton's interview schedule [Marton, 1981]: introduction, actual task, general questions about the individual approach to the task, the appropriateness, learning event and assessment, the appropriateness of the task and the focus of collaborative assessment via SNS.

The final sample of respondents consisted of 10 students (4 male and 6 female students of the same age but different faculties and various patterns of participation in the community- high, medium, and low). The interviews were conducted during the breaks or after the classes and typically lasted about 30 minutes. The written interviews took 3-6 days to be completed. Each oral interview was recorded using a mobile sound recorder and translated into English. Written feedback provided in Russian was also translated into English. Totally, 7 responses were received in the following formats: 3 oral interviews in Russian (high. medium, low level of participation), 2 written responses in English (high level) and 2 written responses in Russian (medium and low level).

Data analysis

The data was analyzed in an iterative manner to describe the set of categories reflecting different meanings and different ways of experiencing collaborative e-assessment via SNS learning community [Akerlind, 2005; Marton, 1981]. The analysis started with transcribing and translating oral interviews verbatim, the written comments in Russian were also translated into English. The oral interviews (three in number) provided the richest source of data [Akerlind, 2005]. The interviews were listened line by line and paying attention to pragmatic factors of nonverbal communication such as an emphasis, asking for clarification, intonation. It served as an alternative way to bring interpretation closer to the participants' understanding. The preliminary analysis of the oral interviews was then reconsidered in relation to the written responses. To manage the data, the large oral transcripts were used to select excerpts that were physically sorted on the table together with the written responses. The series of summary notes were made at each iteration using a spatial representation of my sense of the similarity or difference between them, focussing on the pool of meaning or collective experience and comparing meanings from each individual interview with the collective context to find the variation [Akerlind, 2005; Marton, 1981]. Following Marton's and Akerlind's strategies of doing phenomenographic analysis, categories were developed based on their similarities. Multiple readings were used as a strategy to explore new perspectives to emerge, while holding the other aspects frozen in mind [Marton, 1981].

Findings and Discussion

The phenomenographic analysis resulted in proposing an outcome space that covers the following categories of experience, presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 - The phenomenographic outcome of students 'experiences

Category	Focus
Experiencing collaborative e-assessment as a motivational dimension	intrinsic motives extrinsic motives
Experiencing collaborative e-assessment as an ethical dimension	privacy issues empowerment
Experiencing collaborative e-assessment as a technological dimension	affordances design of the community
Experiencing collaborative e-assessment as a psycho-pedagogical dimension	assessment and feedback difficulties in the actual work learning outcomes

Category 1: Experiencing collaborative e-assessment as a motivational dimension. According to this category the students described the variation in motives for experiencing the phenomenon to a certain level of participation (high/medium/low). They focused on the variety of motives that can be encouraging or discouraging for their participation in the task. All the motives can be classified into intrinsic (self-motivation, inner obligation, curiosity, fear etc.) or extrinsic (exam, extra overload). The voluntary character of participation in the community and the absence of traditional grading system was very encouraging for students: four students out of seven reported this. They paid special attention to self-regulation as the motivation for engagement. However, three participants noted that extra grades would make them work more.

Category 2: Experiencing collaborative e-assessment as an ethical dimension.

In this category the students experience the phenomenon as a way of facing some ethical issues as the factors influencing their attitude to the collaborative e-assessment and engagement. The focus was on the issues of privacy and anonymity when sharing works or comments and the idea of empowerment. Regarding the privacy issues and openness of the community, there was a variation in meanings. Some students needed an open, larger group with more access to other papers. However, the other perspective was to make both the comments and the papers anonymous. The students understand that such openness is not suitable for all. As for the issue of empowerment, the analysis pointed to the tension existing in the experiences. Some students experienced themselves in a teachers' role with the peers being like experts, whereas the students with low participation reported "the feeling of being unnecessary and missing the opportunity". The need to share the power more with the students was identified by suggesting to delegate some moderating functions to the students.

Category 3: Experiencing collaborative e-assessment as a technological dimension. For some students using a SNS for collaboration was quite appropriate because of its affordances such as a quick access to materials and participants, usefulness, media storage like collective "portfolio" of papers. Other experiences were not so positive because of the problems that the students faced: many distracting factors like other communities or messages, inappropriateness for writing essays; inconvenience of sharing essays in discussion boards. The design issue caused many different ideas about the way how the collaborative e-assessment can be improved in a SNS community: to share more video content, to use walls instead of discussion boards, to use another platform Telegram channel, to change the settings of the group for better teacher-student communication

Category 4: Experiencing collaborative e-assessment as a psycho-pedagogical dimension. In this category the students' understanding and variation in perception were focussed on the issues related to assessment, style of the feedback, difficulties when doing the task and learning outcomes. The analysis revealed a great tension concerning the necessity to assess such collaborative activities and students'

level of participation. Some students provided arguments against introducing any grades for their contribution because the community is for self-motivated learners, or it can have a demotivating impact. But 5 students think that grading would be a motivational factor for them to comment more. Overall, the participants see the contradiction between the pragmatic discourse and the necessity to introduce grades and the ethical space related to trustworthiness and teacher-student relationships. Concerning the feedback students were focussed on the different aspects of the teacher's and peers' feedback, its frequency and style. Some students needed a more structured schedule with the rubrics and the checklist of the criteria to follow. The students reported the necessity to collaborate more with the peers. There was the difference in psychological readiness to participate more or less in collaborative practices: some students reported some fear in the beginning which disappeared with more feedback and practice. Some students did not experience any fears about providing the feedback. The students would prefer a less formal style of providing the feedback. The lack of the opportunity to leave an anonymous comment eliminated any chance for rude comments or bullying which was appreciated by some students. Besides the teacher's role was central in arranging and managing the process. The participants underline the importance of instantaneous and fast process of communication with the tutor and the readiness to provide guidance:

The focus on difficulties is characterised by individual differences and difficulties in language learning. But the main factors were the following: the lack of time, self-discipline and initial fears, moral difficulty of assessing and being assessed, more concentration, correctness of the language and the opinion about the criteria. Some students describe the difficulty in understanding and assessing the other's opinions and ideas mentioned in the essay.

The focus on learning outcomes is one of the most important research issues and describes the variation in students' understanding of the learning outcomes at the closure of the project. Most students with medium and high levels of participation describe different benefits they received from the activity. They report the increased motivation to write and practise more, positive changes in the degree of concentration and attentiveness. Two students mentioned the fact of socialising more and making more friends from learning environment. One of the most significant learning outcomes is much experience and feeling of belonging to the collective. However, the student with a low level of participation described negative aspects of learning experience pointing to demotivating impact and the feeling of "uselessness". The participant explained it by personal problems of misunderstanding of the assessment process in general.

Conclusion

The findings presented in the study delineate the strengths and limitations of collaborative e-assessment based on NL principles and mediated via an SNS [Goodyear et al., 2001]. Technological dimension (category 3) is linked with a high degree of flexibility and an ease of the access to the materials, the peers, and the tutor. By contrast with a traditional format of teacher-student interaction such an NL space creates more opportunities for group work and practise outside classroom settings. Despite some distractions and difficulties reported in psycho-pedagogical dimension, the students gained from social interaction with the peers and developed a sense of community [McConnell, 2002]. New opportunities for group working and a new format was a motivational factor affecting their higher engagement in the collaborative tasks. The asynchronous mode of NL collaborative assessment via SNS provided more time for reflection in contrast with "real- time" interactions [Goodyear et al., 2001]. The ethical dimension is focused on the issues of power sharing and the necessity for the teacher to

consider the issues of openness when deploying SNS as a platform for collaborative e-assessment.

The limitations of collaborative e-assessment mediated via SNS are also in line with the constraints outlined within NL approach. The lack of expressive richness and the difference in style of communication are reported by the participants in the category related to psycho-pedagogical dimension. These issues are relevant for the style of providing feedback and academic content which is embedded into non-academic space of the SNS which is primarily used for entertainment and socialising [Jones and Healing, 2010]. The levels of discourse are also reported to be a constraint for greater engagement given the fact that English is not a mother tongue for the participants. The academic content and learning tasks aimed at Academic IELTS training make the discourse more analytical and the comments impersonal and much longer in comparison with the traditional texting in SNS [Goodyear et al., 2001]. These aspects relate to the difficulties in the actual work and can be eliminated with the help of careful planning of learning tasks. The identified variations can be viewed as key concepts for the conditions to improve teaching practices enhanced by SNSs at: i). changing teaching practices to engage more students in collaborative assessment practices via SNS; ii) refining the design of a SNS based learning community; iii). informing teachers in their choices how to manage such learning settings.

Overall, the outcome space with four categories can inform teachers' choices in designing and implementing SNS for collaborative assessment to improve learning outcomes of students. The study contributes to the field of research by providing an alternative way of describing the students' experiences and presents a holistic view on students' perceptions of collaborative e-assessment via SNS for academic IELTS training. This perspective moves away from just good or bad experiences of students [McConnell 2002]. The future research can be directed to analysing such interaction within the university educational environments using other methodological approaches.

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Оценивание в сотрудничестве: использование для улучшения образовательных результатов в университете

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Аннотация

В статье представлены результаты феноменографического исследования, которое было проведено для изучения восприятия студентами оценивания в сотрудничестве через сайт

социальной сети (SNS), чтобы понять, как можно улучшить академическую успеваемость студентов. Процесс обучения рассматривается с точки зрения основ сетевого обучения. Данные были собраны с помощью серии интервью, анализ которых позволил выделить четыре категории факторов, влияющих на академическую успеваемость в рамках оценивания в сотрудничества: мотивационное, этическое, технологическое и психолого-педагогическое измерения. Авторы подробно описывают конструкты каждой категории, обращая внимание на сильные и слабые стороны использования данной технологии в практике совместного оценивания. Результаты исследования могут использованы в практике организации коллаборативного обучения посредством социальных медиа для повышения качества образовательного процесса.

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Ключевые слова

Восприятие студентов, феноменография, оценивание в сотрудничестве, сайты социальных сетей, университет.

Библиография

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