Learning and participating through online role-taking

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Abstract

Researchers agree on the efficacy of role-taking to various psychosocial aspects of learning. Many roles can be designed and proposed within learning contexts with different degrees of efficacy.

This paper aims to study online role-taking in a collaborative learning context, by comparing the efficacy of two roles covered by the participants: a) the e-tutor, acting during web-discussions, and b) the editor, in charge of supervising a collaborative writing task. Fourty-nine in-service teachers, attending a blended Master course, performed both roles in turn. Roles efficacy has been measured in terms of: a) participation to the online activities (by counting the number of messages and documents posted), b) perception of the skills acquired (by a 9-items semi-structured questionnaire).

Results show that teachers with an online high participation score (HP) performed both roles (85%) more usually than lower participants (LP). No relevant difference in participation score was found between teachers performing only the role of editor or that of e-tutor. 44% of the participants declared to prefer the e-tutor role, 35% the editor, and 21% both of them.

Four themes emerged from the analysis of the open-ended question about the motivations for the role preferences: a) behaviourist (choice depending on role features), b) cognitive (based on the relation between role features and personal skills), c) constructivist (role perceived as promoting the development of personal skills) and d) socio-constructivist (role perceived as promoting the development of collaborative skills). HP teachers show more sophisticated pedagogical understandings of role-taking motivating their preference with socio-constructivist argumentations (85,71%), while LP teachers declare more behaviourist preference (69,23%).

Both roles were perceived as useful for fostering participation and improving communication and collaboration skills. Nevertheless, editor is perceived as more useful than e-tutor in promoting online and offline participation and individual learning.