

# Online Learning Communities and Formative Peer Assessment: Two Case Studies in the Field of Humanities

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**Abstract** — While there is considerable research on online teaching, less has been written about online peer assessment and feedback at a university level within the context of learning communities in the field of Humanities. Advances in the internet have helped to promote a social constructivist learning theory more in keeping with the idea of preparing our students to work collaboratively and communicate effectively. The purpose of this article is to describe the author's practical experiences with two different subjects at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, Spain: Lesson Planning According to the Communicative Methodological Principles, a post-graduate subject which is part of a 200-hour course on Spanish as a foreign language, and English IV, a compulsory quarterly subject in the second year of the degree in Modern Languages. We will discuss the benefits that students and teachers can obtain by being part of a learning community and using online formative peer assessment.

**Index Terms**— Learning communities, Peer assessment, Humanities

## I. INTRODUCTION

Within the theoretical framework of the social constructivist learning theory, it is believed that learning is more effective when students are actively engaged in the learning process rather than when they are receiving knowledge passively. Likewise, "learning is not only active but interactive" (Hiltz, 1998), and successful peer interactions, whether online or not, have been found to result in more effective learning. The expansion of a social view of learning, the increased interest in the concept of community and cooperative learning, and the advances in the internet and other communication technologies have fostered a paradigmatic shift to collaborative pedagogy in education.

Ke & Hoadley (2009) define online learning

communities as "a developed activity system in which a group of learners, unified by a common cause and empowered by a supportive virtual environment, engage in collaborative learning within an atmosphere of trust and commitment" (p. 489). For Rovai (2002), the essential indicators of a community of students include the existence of a community spirit, trust and interactivity between peers, and common expectations amongst the students. According to Thurston (2005), online peer support "involves conflict and challenge (reflecting Piagetian schools of thought) and on another level it involves scaffolding and working within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development" (p. 356). There are many advantages when working within a learning community such as the increase of students' persistence in courses due to strong feelings of community, the flow of information among all learners, the availability of support when needed, the commitment to group goals, the cooperation among members, and the satisfaction with group efforts are among the ones mentioned by Rovai (2002).

In the present paper, we present two experiences in the use of formative peer assessment within the context of asynchronous learning communities in the teaching of two subjects at the Universidad de Las Palmas de Gran Canaria (ULPGC), Spain: Lesson Planning According to the Communicative Methodological Principles, a subject within a 200-hour post-graduate course on Spanish as a foreign language (SFL), migration and intercultural curriculum, and English IV, a compulsory semester module in year two of the degree in Modern Languages. Both cases show how the redesigning of formative assessment within an asynchronous learning community can be used to enhance student learning and how technology can support this type of practices. Bearing in mind Brown and Adler's (2008) statement that "one of the best ways to learn something is, after all, to teach it to others" (p. 18), we used Johnson and Johnson's Theory of Cooperative Learning (2006) as heuristic guidelines in both cases.

The paper is organized as follows: Section 2 briefly reviews the concept of online peer assessment and its

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different types. Sections 3 and 4 describe our two case studies which include information about the participants, the material, the procedure, the results, along with a brief discussion of these cases. Section 5 states the conclusions drawn from the present study.

## II. ONLINE ASSESSMENT

Recent times have seen a rapid growth in the use of new technologies in education; however, the use of these new technologies for assessment is not a common practice. According to Crisp (2007), there is a preconception that all web-based assessment can only assess lower order skills, while Kelly, Baxter and Anderson (2010) argue that too often the use of information and communication technologies in higher education only enhances the transmission approach instead of a self-regulated learning approach. Self-regulated students “participate metacognitively, motivationally and behaviourally in their own learning process; effective students actively construct knowledge by setting goals, analyzing tasks, planning strategies and monitoring their understanding” Kelly, Baxter and Anderson (2010, p. 535). However, Manninen and Pesonen (2001) are “concerned about the overemphasis on the constructive theory of learning that almost seems to be equated with networked-based learning environments. This could result in too narrow an approach to teaching” (p. 144). Online assessment should mean more than using the same tests and assessment tasks used in face-to-face lessons.

Assessment is an essential part of the process of teaching and learning. It not only provides feedback on learning to both the student and the teacher, it documents competency and skill development, it allows students to be graded and ranked, it validates certification and license procedures for professional practice and it allows benchmarks to be established for standards (Crisp, 2007, p. 23). Among the different types of assessment, peer assessment is defined as “the process through which groups of individuals rate their peers” (Falchikov, 1995, p. 175). While reviewing the validity, fairness, accuracy and the implications for practice of self-assessment, peer assessment and co-assessment in the field of higher education, Dochy, Segers and Sluijsmans (1999) conclude that, at a practical level, peer assessment can be valuable both as a method for formative assessment and as a part of the learning process.

There are different forms of peer assessment:

- Peer ranking which consists of having each group member rank all of the others from best to worst on one or more factors;
- Peer nomination which consists of having each member of the group nominate the member who is perceived to be the highest in the group on a particular characteristic or dimension of performance; and

- Peer rating which consists of having each group member rate other group members on a given set of performance or personal characteristics using any one of several kinds of rating scale. (Dochy et al., 1999).

An article on the benefits of peer-assessment and strategies for its practice at university presented a different typology of peer assessment, and made a distinction among individual, intra-group and inter-group (Ibarra, Rodríguez and Gómez, 2012). Applying Dochy’s and Ibarra’s typology, the case studies presented in this paper correspond to intra-group peer assessment, with peer nomination used as a tool in the first case and peer rating in the second.

Finally, another important aspect of peer evaluation is the students’ degree of control of evaluation criteria. Nicol (2009) states that there are researchers who believe that “changes in tutor-student power and authority relationships must take place for true learner self-regulation” (p. 349). Nicol also discusses that some researchers argue that students should be actively involved in the construction of the evaluation criteria if they are to develop strong self-assessment skills. Although this has not been the case in the present cases, our intention is to try to implement a student-controlled peer evaluation at least in our first case in the near future.

## III. CASE STUDY I

Lesson planning according to the communicative methodological principles is a three-week module subject which is part of an online 200-hour post-graduate course on Spanish as a foreign language, migration, and intercultural curriculum. This course is designed for prospective teachers of Spanish for whom evaluation will eventually be part of their teaching duties. The main goal is that students should have first-hand experience in assessing a communicative teaching unit while designing their own teaching unit, learning the communicative principles, practicing working in a collaborative way, and using wikis. These are essential tools in their potential jobs.

We aim to promote authentic learning tasks that will be necessary for our students in their future jobs and support teamwork with this experience. This learner-centered approach allows students to demonstrate that they have started to think, understand, act and participate as members of what Kirkwood and Price (2008) call “a community of practice related to their profession or discipline area” (p. 13); thus, they have begun to act as teachers.

Tinoca and Oliveira (2013) stated that:

*“Teachers are required to be creative and reflexive practitioners with the ability to develop knowledge independently and solve complex problems. This represents a new paradigm for teaching where it is necessary to promote learning environments capable of*

*sustaining deep learning anchored in real contexts*" (p. 2).

As prospective teachers, these students learn the subject while behaving as future teachers. Although participants work independently on their lesson plan, they share resources, ideas, possible problems. This group work is also an important part of their training as teachers. According to Caple and Bogle (2013), "the popularity of group work is driven by the fact that companies value leadership skills that graduates can acquire to be involved in a group project" (p. 198). From our experience as teachers, we are firmly convinced that the best form of continuous assessment was the use of detailed and individualized feedback, and not simply attributing a numerical score. However, both the system and the students themselves demanded and felt the necessity for a grade.

In order for participants to have a clear understanding of their assessment, we specified the assessment criteria from the beginning, and well-defined learning outcome. At the end of the course, students would know how to design a communicative lesson plan for students of SFL. These assessment criteria were devised to encourage students to learn independently, and to develop social interpersonal skills, which we are important in their future professions.

#### *A. Participants*

This study was carried out with a group of 33 post-graduate students. About 85% of the students were graduates from the Teacher Training School, while most of the others had studied English Philology. One had a degree in Journalism. A total of 82.5 % of the participants were unemployed, and those at work were either primary school teachers in the public education system or self-employed private tutors. They were highly motivated and very participative.

#### *B. Material*

The University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria uses the Moodle E-learning platform for both classroom teaching subjects and online training. Teachers organize the website of their subjects personally, except for an introductory section called Virtual Classroom where students find institutional information, such as the subject syllabus, a forum of the subject, and a section for news and announcements.

From the beginning, students were assigned their tasks and given the aims, the assessment criteria, the submission deadline, as well as all the information they needed to complete their task on the subject webpage. This information, which included videos and online links, was divided into three units: the first one, entitled "Approaches to Language Teaching", gave some examples of communicative lesson plans and task-based

activities. A second unit offered guidance material from various governmental sources including the Teaching of SFL online site with lesson plan samples on a variety of topics; and a final unit provided students with online reference manuals and bibliography.

The assignment consisted in their designing a six-hour SFL lesson plan for a specific group of students individually, and, within their group, choosing the best lesson plan after reflecting on the different lesson plans, explaining their decision and reaching a consensus. We wanted to make sure students understood the rationale behind this second part of the assignment, because, as teachers, they will have to evaluate their students and make certain decisions. We also tried to convey that by using meta-cognitive activities such as analyzing other people's work and reflecting on their own, we promote critical thinking and students' self-regulatory learning process.

#### *C. Procedure*

Students chose one of the nine basic units on learning a foreign language: introducing myself, getting to know the city where they live, learning how to use public transport, renting a flat, going to the doctor, applying for an ID, looking for a job, going shopping and getting to work. There were nine wikis on the subject webpage related to those nine areas and students were encouraged to choose the topic they liked the most as soon as possible as once there were three or four students in one group, the group would be complete.

Once they knew their working topic, they had to read the information on the web. If in doubt, there was a forum for questions and sharing resources where they could ask the teacher or other students for help. There were also a Welcome Forum and a Cafeteria Forum, where students could meet virtually and connect with each other in an informal atmosphere.

Students prepared their lesson plan in three weeks and they uploaded their proposals on the wiki. When the deadline was over, they had three days to read the other members' lesson plans and choose the best one, explaining their decision in detail. From the beginning, students were encouraged to share their information, resources, and ideas with other group members, ask for help or inspiration when needed, and give support to the other members of their group.

As mentioned, this type of assessment is called peer nomination and "consists of having each member of the group nominate the member who is perceived to be the highest in the group on a particular characteristic or dimension of performance" (Dochy et al., 1999, p. 338). Not until participants had discussed and explained their choice did the teacher comment on the different lesson plans. Although there was no specific rubric, students were shown some excellent models of lesson plans on the various topics. They could access many online resources



and different ways to design a lesson plan. Finally, the final grade was based on the teacher's assessment, and students' participation in the wiki and their peer assessment. To evaluate students' participation in the wiki, we took into account Boud, Cohen and Sampson's ideas on group discussion assessment. These authors emphasize the importance of evaluating not only the content of the contributions of students in these discussions, but also how each member of the group has participated in it. Among the participatory skills that improve the quality of interaction, these authors include leadership, negotiation and conflict management, interactions among participants, and task execution or distribution of the feedback (Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 1999, p. 422).

#### *D. Results*

The results were very positive. Students favoured this type of assessment and understood its advantages. Participants commented that by reading and assessing other people's work, they learned from their own mistakes, and also to express their opinions in an impartial and objective way.

When asked about who should have the final decision, 60 % of the students named the teacher as the only person who should be in charge of marking as, some stated, he or she is the specialist on the subject, while the rest of the students believed that assessment should include student self-assessment and their peers.

#### *E. Discussion*

In an article on the principles of assessment for project and research based learning, Hunaiti et al. (2010) complained that, despite all the changes on theory and teaching methods of education, assessment strategies in post-compulsory education have remained virtually unchanged and mentioned several factors that had encouraged the need for this change such as the opening of the European borders, students' increased ease to pursue their educations abroad, the increasingly diverse student population, and their different learning styles.

This experience responded to this need for a change in post-compulsory education. Bearing in mind that the final objective of this subject is to prepare SFL teachers and teachers need to know not only how to write a lesson plan but how to evaluate, this experience was very positive. Students, and post-graduate students in particular, want to understand their grades and to know how to improve their work. The support of the learning communities throughout the activity proved beneficial. Together, students with little or no previous experience in lesson planning decided on the level, the number of hours, their own students' ages and backgrounds. They discussed the contents they were going to include in their lesson plans and the aims of their activities. Likewise, they also shared

resources they had found while preparing their own work. Finally, by reading others' lesson plans on the same topic, and comparing, sharing opinions, and assessing others' work, they not only reflect on their work, but acquire understanding of key concepts in depth and the difficulties teachers face when marking. With the help of the students' comments, teachers can assess their lesson plans from new and different perspectives.

#### IV. CASE STUDY 2

This blended-learning experience was conducted with a group of students in the module subject English IV at the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria. This core module in year two of the degree in Modern Languages is taught in two different student groups, with two subgroups each at the same time, during the semester two of year two. In addition to the grammatical, lexical and phonological contents of this course syllabus, students needed to master a single type of composition, the opinion essay. There were a total of 60 face-to-face hours and 90 self-study hours.

At the end of this second semester subject, students are expected to write two well-founded opinion essays on any topic related to the four themes taught – culture, new technologies, globalization, and the commercial world. Learning to write an opinion essay was the final goal in our case study, but it was also important for the students to reflect on their own learning and to develop teamwork skills through practical activities. Self-regulatory activities, such as reflection, metacognition and self-regulation are essential aspects of students' learning and assessment processes.

One of our goals was to create a "learning community" where students would help each other share information and tools, and reflect on their own participation and knowledge in order to be able to correct the others. Vonderwell, Liang, and Alderman (2007) believe that "asynchronous online discussions facilitate a multidimensional process of assessment demonstrated in the aspects of structure, self-regulatory activities, learner autonomy, learning community and student writing skills" (p. 309). "Online instructors need to take into account assessment as a process as well as assessment as an outcome" (Vonderwell et al, 2007, p. 323). Indeed, the students' comments both during and at the end of the project were assessed as part of the task.

#### *A. Participants*

After explaining to them the benefits of working with their peers when writing opinion essays, 30 students volunteered to participate in this experience. Most participants were 20-year old females who had completed their secondary education at public schools. In a questionnaire at the beginning of our study, they commented that they liked reading, mostly on paper-

format. In general, most of these students indicated that the main difficulty when writing an academic composition was trying to find solid arguments to justify their opinions. This is challenge has nothing to do with linguistic competence. Our practice of previous years confirmed that if we help our students to generate ideas and arguments, they also improve their linguistic skills.

### *B. Material*

The English IV website was divided into a section for reading, listening, and writing, as well as a section dedicated to vocabulary and another one to grammatical issues. All the students and teachers of the subject appear as participants in the page although with, logically, varying degrees of control over it; for example, teachers can upload, edit and erase files. For this project volunteers needed to be able to upload their written compositions and view the work by the rest of the group members. We contacted the ULPGC E-Learning Coordinator, who suggested that the simplest solution would be in creating groups of four students plus the teacher and joining each group with a cluster. Once the grouping and clustering was done, we linked each group to a task and a forum in which only members of that group could upload their essays in the task section, read and comment on the work of their peers in forums especially created for that particular group.

A list of possible topics for the composition and the marking criteria were detailed on the webpage. Students are familiar with these marking criteria as English teachers in this grade have been using similar criteria for English I, II and III. Published on the English IV website from the beginning of the course, the opinion essay rubric included content, lexical resources, grammar proficiency and formal conventions. As students are expected to acquire a B2 level at the end of the course, they are asked to show a B2 level of lexical and grammatical proficiency in their compositions.

Regarding content, students had to decide if there was a clear statement of the writer's opinion in the first and the last paragraph of the others' opinion essays, whether the paragraphs were relevant to the assigned topic, and if the author of the composition included an adequate compulsory opposing viewpoint. With regards to the lexical resources, they had to check if their classmates used appropriate and varied vocabulary, a formal register and a variety of linking devices. As for language usage, students are expected to include a variety of complex structures such as the passive voice, adverbial clauses and modals which are studied in the course. Finally, for the writing conventions section students had to check spelling, punctuation and the layout.

Our hypothesis stated that students will correct grammatical errors rather than dealing with content as it is easier for students to quote a specific grammar book than explaining the reason why they thought that a

specific argument or its supporting idea was not clear, convincing, or right.

### *C. Procedure*

At the beginning of the course, we asked students to complete a form with their personal data, pastimes, their reading habits, and their digital proficiency in both English and Spanish. They were also asked to send a text of approximately 400 words on one of the eight proposed topics, which ranged from sportsmen's salaries to TV reality shows. They were all of them issues that had proved to be very popular with students in previous years.

For five consecutive weeks, we introduced this type of composition in the weekly whole-group hour, when both morning shift and both evening shift groups get together forming a single group of around 40 to 55 students, depending on the student number for each shift. Students analyzed several sample models furnished by the teacher and studied the guidelines and features of this type of writing. In class students also discussed a variety of topics in order to help them get used to arguing properly with the help of Virginia Evans' discussion clock, a useful brainstorming technique which helps students examine a topic from various viewpoints. They held debates to familiarize themselves with producing coherent arguments and sustaining those arguments with different types of examples and illustrations. For these debates we once again used topics suggested by the students in the previous years since these subjects of discussion are usually found more interesting by our learners.

With the class divided into two groups, one in favour and one against, each group had to produce at least one argument for every single viewpoint of the discussion clock which, among others, includes social, educational, economic, artistic, moral, health, and personal viewpoints. Afterwards, they had to illustrate those viewpoints with a convincing example and choose two or three of the strongest arguments to write their own individual opinion essay. Then, individually, students chose an idea of the opposing group to include in their own writing minimizing its importance.

After explaining the main features of this composition and debating in class for five weeks, we asked volunteer students to choose a topic from a list, write their opinion essay and upload it onto the online task section for their group. Two weeks later, participants were encouraged to read other participants' essays and upload their comments, following the established rubric that was on the web page for the course. Some common sense instructions were given to students such as being polite and stating opinions in a respectful manner, not concentrating on one type of error or mistake, reading their peers' comments as an opportunity to improve their writing skills before the exam and practicing making oneself understood.

#### *D. Results*

The results were obtained by comparing the essays submitted at the beginning of the course with the two written in class as part of the final grade for the English IV course, together with the analysis of the comments written by the students in forums. We also made a qualitative assessment of this initiative through a final questionnaire where participants had to reflect on their participation in the discussion forum as evaluators or assessors of their classmates.

Students wrote two opinion essays in class on one of the three proposed topics, all related to the themes studied in class: culture and the business world for the first test and globalization and new technologies for the second. The results of these two tests were also compared with those of the writing that students submitted at the beginning of the course, before they were taught this kind of written composition.

In general, all participants improved their proficiency in this type of composition. Specifically, 45.4 % of participants improved their grade in at least two out of ten marks and only 18.1 % improved less than one mark. Nevertheless, since most students were not aware of the formal characteristics of the opinion essay nor did they have the grammatical and lexical tools to express their opinion on a subject formally, it was expected that everyone would improve their writing.

Yet another objective of this teaching practice was to promote critical thinking and metacognitive knowledge, and to check students' satisfaction or rejection at being evaluated by their peers. In the online discussion forum, students were very critical of the work of their peers but always in a considerate way. Polite remarks such as "Please do not be angry with my comment. I tried to be as fair as possible. It is only an opinion" (Student 6), "I've found something that the author could improve" (Student 9) or "I hope you find my comments helpful" (Student 21) were usually part of their comments as well as many words of encouragement such as "The arguments are very clear and the data very interesting" (Student 7), "Well done, keep working in this way" (Student 19), "After reading this essay, I honestly have to say it's almost perfect" (Student 22).

Our initial hypothesis that students will correct grammatical errors was not confirmed as only 16.6 % of students' corrections were grammatical, compared to the 44.4 % that addressed problems with language structure, lack of an argument, or an unclear introduction, while 27.7 % corrected vocabulary mistakes. Although grammar mistakes seem easier to correct as students could refer to authority to explain their correction, students paid more attention to what the writer was trying to convey and how well it was done.

When the activity was completed, a final questionnaire was distributed to participants and they had to reflect on this experience. In the first question they were asked to

mention the number of times they had participated in the forum, 27.2 % of the students wrote three or more times while most participants just wrote once or twice. 18.1 % of the participants just merely read the comments, but did not write anything in the forums.

When asking students about the easiest and the most difficult item to assess, our initial hypothesis was that grammar would be the easiest aspect while the content would be the most difficult one. However, students mentioned grammar and content, 36.3% and 50% respectively, as the easiest criteria to correct. Only three students expressed difficulty in assessing content, such as the student who said "I found it difficult to know whether their arguments were appropriate or not for the subject."

When asked if the experience had helped them improve their writing, 72.7 % of students responded affirmatively while 18.1 % answered in a negative way. With the fifth question we wanted to know if students would have participated more had there been greater supervision by the teacher. In their answers, 72.2 percent said they would have participated more, although a student admitted that "I would have done it without enjoying the activity, merely another learning activity."

The last question on whether their participation would improve if it were part of the course final grade, the group was virtually divided with 45.45% in favor, 45.45% against, and 9% who abstained from answering. A student claimed that if it were part of the final grade, "I believe we would make a greater effort and devote more time to the project."

#### *E. Discussion*

Certainly, the participation of students in this project to improve written expression with the help of peer assessment and personal reflection was not very high. While some students said they would have participated more if the project was a contributing part towards the final module grade, one of the goals of this practice would have been lost, namely that students get used to managing their own learning progress and assessing their performance. In that sense, the forums helped students to reflect on their opinion essays by using metacognitive skills that would serve them to help their peers in their progress.

Although students' initial engagement with the project was very responsive, students' workload at the end of the course, aggravated by some technical problems, resulted in a decrease in the participation. The ULPGC computer service suggested using the course webpage to accommodate both the student work as well as the forums. However, creating groups and clusters and connecting a task and a forum for each of these groupings was laborious and time-consuming. We also had to explain in detail to the students in class and through emails how to participate in both the task and the forum.



The added difficulties of learning how to use the online tools initially discouraged some students.

The benefits observed in a previous work on the use of rubrics for assessing student collaborative work using wikis were also present in this experience. By using the rubrics to evaluate their peers, students were more aware of the difficulty of the task and the nuances that appear when teachers assess and correct a written composition. Also, this type of learning experience allows students to practice how to make their arguments understood, providing significant examples and relating the ideas in a structured and logical way, as it is not until students try to explain their ideas to others that they realize the flaws of their argumentation.

## V. CONCLUSION

The results of these case studies varied in the degree of satisfaction of the participants, the achieved objectives and the facility of the implementation of peer assessment within the course syllabus. In the first case, post-graduate students understood the rationale of this type of assessment and not only agreed with it, but they were highly motivated by this task. They benefited from this experience of “assessment to learn” by developing academic and professional competencies, by being involved in their learning process and by promoting interpersonal strategies. The aims of the course, to be able to design and assess a lesson plan and to learn to work collaboratively, were achieved.

With regards to this possibility, Hou et al. (2007) studied the limits to students’ peer assessment online discussions when the teachers do not intervene in the process in project-based learning and concluded that, although prior to teacher intervention the students demonstrated a certain level of discussion behaviors related to knowledge construction, extended discussions are “not easily generated by peer assessment alone. It requires active teacher feedback and guidance or formulation of more sophisticated rules of PBL” (Hou et al., 2007, p. 249).

In the second case study, the teacher-limited intervention and the technical difficulties were mentioned as some of the reasons for the students’ lack of engagement with the project. These younger students demanded more supervision by the teacher and did not take full advantage of the possibilities of having their work read and commented by their peers. Very few students acknowledged that including this peer assessment experience in the syllabus would mar the objective of the project; that is, to promote learners autonomy, management skills and the idea of an online learning community.

Collaborative learning and peer assessment foster critical thinking, motivation and self-regulation. They can help students construct their own knowledge since a blended or online context allows students time to reflect

and process that knowledge. When designing online student interactions, we need to be aware of how to promote the creation of productive learning communities fostering life skills that students will need in their future jobs, as students will need to acquire the habit of gathering and sharing information, synthesizing, working in groups, and also discussing and collaborating on projects also.

New technologies are increasingly present in and outside of the classroom, and its use should be part of our syllabus. In these two case studies, online peer assessment served not so much to deliver the student final grade, but as a working tool for the participants and created effective learning communities. Working together within a learning community prepares students to work collaboratively, to express their opinions in an orderly and reasoned way, and to accept feedback from others. In general, both students and teachers are satisfied with the results of these educational experiences although further work needs to be done on the different critical thinking skills that participants used when engaging with their peers. Our intention is to study these skills in the near future.

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