

## DIVERSITY: A BLESSING OR A CURSE FOR ONLINE COLLABORATION?

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>“Why does collaboration and diversity matter?”</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>“But what do we mean by diversity?”</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>“When was diversity a curse? When was it a blessing?”</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>What is the role of the individual group members for happy online and collaborative learning?</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>What is the role of the facilitator and co-facilitator?</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>What kind of diversity matters the most in our educational context?</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Theory applying to our experiences</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Conclusion “Was diversity in our group a curse or a blessing?”</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Top 10 tips from PBL9 “How to make online collaboration with a diverse group a blessing”</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Appendix 1 Table “Diversity during collaboration online”: <a href="https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ZVCH3HawGPYux9NnZ1OqUni3KQqzNz94sdteNh5fdAo/edit#gid=0">https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ZVCH3HawGPYux9NnZ1OqUni3KQqzNz94sdteNh5fdAo/edit#gid=0</a></b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Blogs of PBL9 group members</b>	<b>7</b>

12-6-2017



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

---

## DIVERSITY: A BLESSING OR A CURSE FOR ONLINE COLLABORATION?

*Francisca Frenks, Independent webinar and online collaboration consultant and trainer at [XWebinar.nl](http://XWebinar.nl) and [www.dyhme.com](http://www.dyhme.com), Gizeh Perez-Tenorio, Linköping University, Miriam Mosing, Karolinska Institute, Mohammed Seed Ahmed, Karolinska Institute, Natalia Rivera Sifaki, Karolinska Institutet and Karolinska University Hospital, Sonja Sharp, Independent Institute of Education Varsity College Cape Town, Åsa Kneck, Ersta Sköndal University.*

---

### Introduction

The authors, independently and without prior knowledge of each other, joined a learning experiment: The Open Networked Learning (ONL162- the second edition of 2016) course for 13 weeks in the autumn of 2016. We were randomly assigned to the same Problem Based Learning (PBL) group and collaborated online. Our group, PBL9, was part of a Community of Inquiry, (COI) consisting of more than 100 students and 25 facilitators. We worked synchronously and asynchronously. One member joined a previous iteration; ONL152 and then facilitated ONL161 prior to joining our iteration as co-facilitator. Two members proceeded later on to facilitate the next iteration; ONL171. What this evidence is how ONL fosters not only a great learning experience, but moreover seems to instill strong sense of community spirit and learning desire within the participants.

Our motivation for joining the ONL course was common sense of curiosity, a desire for professional development and a strong believe that an international learning experience would give us valuable skills needed to succeed in our various professions in today's society.

Was diversity a curse or a blessing for PBL9, our group? We were diverse, yet there was commonality as well. How did we balance between togetherness and diversity? We want to share our experience and the knowledge we gained with the participants of #EDEN17.

### “Why does collaboration and diversity matter?”

Online collaboration and communication through social networks, free knowledge exchange and informal learning online are playing an important role in today's society. Emerging technologies, that are ever-changing, combined with the complexity of the problems that the 21st century poses, requires collaborative efforts from people with diverse skills, that are able to adapt and learn whilst working on the problem at hand. These skills are referred to as fluencies (1).

Many educational theorists understand the importance of these fluencies and concur on the same principal: collaboration, digital literacies, citizenship, and the ability to problem solve are all critical skills in the 21st century. Without these skills, the youth today will be unable to adapt to the rapidly changing landscape in a globally connected world (2).

In accordance with the above, The European Commission, is promoting various initiatives aimed at increasing training in digital skills for the workforce and for consumers; modernizing education across the EU; harnessing digital technologies for learning and for the recognition and validation of skills; and anticipating and analyzing skills needs (3).

### “But what do we mean by diversity?”

As a group, we were diverse due to our genders, ages, educational and cultural backgrounds, occupations, philosophies, languages, communication styles, learning styles, as well as previous knowledge and experiences. We all had different

expectations from the course, personal goals and time availability. Moreover, more subtler differences were evidenced by our array of personalities, fears, drive and motivations. In summary we were socially, emotionally and cognitively diverse. Next, we are going to discuss how diversity of social, emotional and cognitive factors can make online collaboration a curse or a blessing. For a detailed description refer to the table in appendix 1

### “When was diversity a curse? When was it a blessing?”

**Curse: Social diversity** can become a curse when there is no agreement within the group. Some social factors such as different age can influence how well we use the technology and how well we communicate online. How do we network online and our “netiquette” or convention of politeness while using the net (4). Different language than our native may lead to misunderstandings, miscommunications and insecurities. Diverse cultural backgrounds can impact the dynamic of the group due to different expectations and social behaviors that takes time to understand by the group. **Emotional diversity** results a curse due to the manifestations of our different fears, emotions, feelings. For instance, some people need to talk about emotions, some others prefer addressing structure. During group meetings, some frustrations may arise due to taking time from the task to discuss emotions or due to an inflexible structure. Different personal insecurities, discomfort with taking leading roles in the group, drive and motivations to engage in the online work can also be a curse when diverge so much among group members. **Cognitive diversity** could be a curse when knowledge is valued higher than experiences, wisdom, making great notes, creating a tense atmosphere, etcetera. “Babylonian” confusion is the result in a diverse group when the basic concepts lack consensus. It can be a curse when words have not the same meaning for everyone. For instance, if you work in a diverse group the word “group rules” can have many meanings. What narrative is in everybody’s head when you talk about “group rules”? Do we talk about leadership of the meeting, how do we take notes, set norms, values? Do you have a negative or positive reaction to this word and why? When the group members work at different paces or have different learning styles, for example, some people think first and then act, whilst others do first and then think, it can be difficult to synchronize the work.

**Blessing:** A curse can become a blessing, it is just the way in which we view it, i.e. the perspective we use. For example, our **social diversity** helped us in PBL9 to improve our online communication and even our English language by taking advantage of each other’s knowledge. Different behaviors lead to thoughts of effectiveness of online behavior. An example is Online Disinhibition Effect, where people lose their normal social inhibitions and behave in ways that they would not normally (5). This shows in people’s behaviors to varying degrees, and is evident in online behavior in general. To what extent people lose their inhibition may differ, but we all do to some extent when online. So, the question that we as a group needed to pose was: what works and what is annoying? Also, when we could use a variety of networking skills, like Facebook, LinkedIn, Google+, Skype, Adobe Connect, etcetera it was a blessing to communicate synchronously and asynchronously online. Different cultural backgrounds can be a blessing when regarded as a source of new ideas and inspiration during online collaboration. Regarding **emotional diversity**, it is a blessing when group members understand which feelings are relevant for the collaboration process and can express themselves and be empathic with others. If there is place and time to talk about emotions which influences the group process, then all problems can be solved. Also, if every member can be made responsible for the group outcomes and is allowed to experience the responsibility of leading the group, they will act more collaboratively. **Cognitive diversity** can also be a blessing when we take advantage of the experienced ones and incorporate what they know toward our theoretical knowledge. It can also be a blessing when we make sure the concepts are clear and the definitions understood the same way for everybody. Group rules, can be translated into group norms and values. However, the group rules need to be revisited and adjusted for the fluidity of the contexts that they find themselves in. When the group first meet, they have no real idea of what online learning is and set rules for this. After we have been together for a while, we need to revisit and adjust these rules giving some flexibility to the present situation.

### What is the role of the individual group members for happy online and collaborative learning?

Individual group members have to contribute to group tasks showing all kind of presences included in the COI model. The emotional presence is set by the individual group members by showing their empathy and awareness of their own emotions.

The group members need to play different roles, like leaders, managers, coordinators, and researchers. Strong leadership within our PBL9 group proved to be vital. To succeed with the educational, process the group members need to have a personal drive, self-organization, creativity and flexibility, time and good connectivity. Being authentic adds value to the group



Figure 2. **Elements of a successful group.**

The Community of Inquiry (COI) model composed by teachers and students and incorporating the emotional presence as a fourth element. The original model developed by Garrison et al. (6) assumes that a worthwhile educational experience occurs due to the interaction of three

core components: social, cognitive and teacher presence. These components will overlap, ultimately creating the ideal educational experience. However, what the COI model does not delve sufficiently into is the aspect of the emotional presence of both the student and the facilitator, and this is perhaps the most critical component to a successful online group. Without acknowledging the emotions of the student, the facilitator is effectively ignoring a large aspect of the student's learning process, and thereby overlooks aspects that could be hindering or enabling the students' progress toward achieving the learning outcomes. Reintes and Rivers recognized this and posited that the fourth component should be added toward the COI model. In their paper, *Measuring and Understanding Learner Emotions: Evidence & Prospects* (7), they explored the importance of emotions within the learning process, and the impact it has not only the learning outcome but also on the learning community that the student may belong to.

### What is the role of the facilitator and co-facilitator?

The role of both co-facilitator and facilitator provide the **teaching presence** in the group, which is defined as the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of achieving personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes (7). The teaching presence can also be regarded as a curse or as a blessing. Facilitators help the group to start. Provide the initial instructions to understand the requirements of the course, the schedule, explain the platforms to be used during the online communication. Facilitators should also know the group members, their expectations from the course, from each other, their drive and motivation, and invite group members to dialogue and know each other. However, it is vital that the facilitator has set the climate in such a way that the group is comfortable enough to express their thoughts and ideas without fear of criticism that is negative but rather constructive. Therefore, this means the facilitator must have delved into the emotional side of the group and understood their emotional needs and their emotional quotient (EQ) levels.

**Curse:** Having too many different platforms to access can be very disconcerting, especially when dealing with a pedagogy such as PBL. Often it is better to consider having a course like this in an environment where the learner is perhaps more settled and do not have to seek different platforms to connect and search for material/answers/connections. No structure or too much structure. What works for who? This can be a double-edged sword as some learners like complete structure and some prefer less structure, depending on the previous experience with PBL. When facilitator is not accepted by the group, or group members have different visions on the role of the facilitator, it can be a curse. Some participants think that facilitator is a management-assistant. If group members don't take responsibility for shared tasks the collaboration process stops, because the facilitator usually don't take responsibility for collaboration management.

**Blessing:** The facilitator help the group by setting administrative tasks (e.g. time, organizations, etc.) in advance and ensuring that everyone knows what to find and where. This will ensure that everyone feels a lot more comfortable and settled, especially in a course that is based on a pedagogy such as problem-based learning, where the learning itself is set in scenarios that are vague. Those are quite unsettling; therefore, it is critical that the administration around the course is clear and logical. Making the structure collaboratively allows for group ownership of the process, leading thereby to a greater chance of success. When the group and the facilitator are in agreement with roles and personal contribution, collaboration will be a smooth process. Reflecting on the role of the facilitator can be helpful during the collaboration process. When group members and facilitators make clear rules about the management tasks and everybody commits to it, collaboration will be a blessing.

### **What kind of diversity matters the most in our educational context?**

Interestingly we found in our group that the emotional presence was very influential, because the group did not expect it to be important. It is not a habit to talk about needs and emotions in an online environment with people you only know by webcam. Yet, it is probably the most critical aspect needed given the loss of communication that takes place in online courses.

We know that in online communication we lose so much of the communication when doing so. Although there is no standard agreed upon number of what makes up the non-verbal part of communication, it seems that the generally accepted percentages are 55% body language, 38% tone, and 7% the actual words (8, 9). If we are to accept these numbers as a standard, then in online communication we lose at least 55% of the online communication due to not being able to see the whole-body language. In the asynchronous meetings, we then rely solely upon the 7% statistic. This means the role of the facilitator becomes that much more important, as the diversity of the group will make the communication that much harder to manage. So, when it comes to the synchronous meetings, we must make sure to have good audio, webcam and sufficient bandwidth. Furthermore, it is vital that the group expresses themselves around the emotional aspects that may arise, so that any misunderstandings can be avoided or prevented.

Diversity in all its facets, therefore, is integral to our educational context. Given the loss of the nonverbal aspect of online communication, the diversity of the group is highlighted or accentuated that much more. This can be either a blessing or a curse, depending on how the group and the facilitator handle the emotional aspect of the process and situation. If this is ignored the diversity of the group will be a curse, and ultimately will be the downfall of the group, resulting in a complete degradation of the process. However, if the group and the facilitator work on acknowledging the emotional aspects of the diversity that the group has and all that it encompasses then the group can only succeed in its collaboration and in achieving its goals. As such the diversity, in all its myriad of facets that it presents itself as, cannot be quantified as being more or less important. Could one say that a social diversity is more important than a cognitive diversity? We posit that that this is not the case, as they both hold equal importance.

Diversity matters also when you work on a topic, a scenario or a problem. We used the FISh model (10) and Google docs to collect input of group members on a topic. Everyone had to answer the same questions by sharing authentic thoughts, knowledge and experiences. This was the base for knowledge construction, reflection and discourse. Diversity was included in this process.

This means that collaboration is effective and the desired  $1 + 1 = 3$  is achieved. Different people bring in different kind of knowledge, different perspectives on a topic and different questions in a discourse.

During group work we discovered differences in the way we were contributing as persons. Some people were great leaders and initiators and others needed to be invited to share their ideas. We had introverts and extroverts in the group and someone's in between. It was the facilitator's role to encourage group members to be explicit about their thoughts on the group work and group process, their needs for contribution and collaboration, to contribute in their authentic way and not to judge too fast and learn to communicate about these differences. We used the basics of Human Dynamics (11) to

understand different ways of communicating and collaborating. Diversity in social presence was needed to gain more insights about successful collaboration without exclusions.

## Theory applying to our experiences

We used the COI framework as a paradigm. The COI model (6) includes the cognitive, social and teacher presence. These elements overlap and contribute to the learning experience. Additionally, we added and discussed the impact of the emotional feedback (7).

**Cognitive.** *“Cognitive presence relates to the design and development of instructional materials, enabling students to construct and confirm meaning through related reflection and discourse” (6,7)*

The course design provided synchronous and asynchronous activities for those who preferred discussing in large communities and for those who choose to reflect alone. There was flexibility and freedom but also good human support and structure, clear instructions and deadlines. Moreover, the ONL encouraged networking. Every member of the group was given the possibility to lead the group and decide over the group presentation, to take notes and schedule meetings. We could choose between different digital tools that suited better our purposes, pace and abilities. We had space and time for self-reflection and for dynamic discussions.

**Social.** Different cultures, languages, genders, ages, races, religions etc. Some of these components will not impact the group collaboration as much as the cognitive component. *“Social presence relates to the establishment of a supportive learning community, providing a venue for communication within a trusted environment where students can express individual identities and establish social relationships” (6,7)*

In this regard, the ONL course design allowed and encouraged networking through membership in the bigger and smaller Google+ communities, tweet chats, Webinars, etc. Networking was important during the course and once the collaboration has been established. Peers' support and positive reception towards everyone's input was also very important for developing relationships and to achieve successful collaborations. While the group contributed with trust, support, inspiration, encouragement, joy, sense of belonging and commitment. And we discuss group rules, for more clearness about online behavior and communication.

**Teaching.** Taking the cognitive and the social elements together, this take us back to the COI framework and the third element: the teacher's presence (here referred to as the facilitator's presence). There is a substantial overlap between the three elements but both, facilitator and co-facilitator bring together all the elements in order to have a successful collaborative environment and learning experience. Here, we go deeper into the different stages a group experiences whilst collaborating as a team (6,7).

According to psychologist Bruce Tuckman (1965), who elaborated on a theory in his article **“Developmental Sequence in Small Groups”**, that groups go through stages during their 'life cycle' (12). The stages are forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning (mourning). All groups will experience these stages but the length of time spent will vary according to the group, the topic and the context. In the case of the ONL course, the duration of the course dictates to a certain extent the start of the forming and the end where the adjourning/mourning stages will take place. However, the stages in between will then vary depending on the groups and the diversity involved.

The Forming stage is identified by when the group first meets, they are positive and polite. Storming is typified by group members pushing against the boundaries set in the forming stage, and it here where teams generally will fail. Conflict will start to arise between members and shows in the natural working styles of team members. This will be evident in online learning when the learning styles differ and the way in which group members wish to work and show their topic presentation.

Norming is when the groups start to resolve their differences and when members start to appreciate the strengths of each other, especially if there is a strong leader then they will respect the leader's authority. So, in the case of ONL162 we had generally several strong learners who managed to find a good rhythm and had bypassed the storming stage fairly quickly. The storming was very brief in that it was only triggered by those that were not participating and that was very quickly resolved. Finally, the performing stage comes in where the group works hard and it leads to achievement, without friction, to the goals of the group.

The end result is when the group finally adjourns at the end of the course, and in this case maybe even 'mourns' the loss of the camaraderie gained during the course. In the case of ONL162 our group decided to continue working together, whereas the groups we facilitated have not. Although Sonja's group definitely was a successful group, barring the one group member who seemed to struggle with his place, the group as a whole did not bond as effectively as the ONL162 group.

Tuckman later added another stage: "transforming", which I believe is what the PBL9 group of ONL162 experienced, whereby we were transformed by our experience and moved onto our next learning experience - EDEN.

**Emotional.** Emotional presence, is the ability of learners to recognize emotions, formulate emotions, controlling emotions. To be empathic, involved and accessible for others concerning their emotions. In an online environment is not always easy or usual to use emotions. Moreover, it is not easy to resolve issues that arise from conflicts within this sphere, and as a result it is perhaps the most critical element that needs to be monitored the most. (15)

### **Conclusion "Was diversity in our group a curse or a blessing?"**

Therefore, we believe diversity matters when collaborating in an educational context, as it brings to the group the "multi-perspectiveness" that is needed when looking at complex problems. Herrington and Herrington (13), advocate this as an essential learning element when it comes to authentic learning tasks, especially when dealing with online environments. Furthermore, they believe that there are multiple roles to support the construction of knowledge, as it helps to articulate tacit knowledge and make it more explicit. This can only be done through diverse group members, where you have those that are perhaps more expressive, as was the case in our group.

### **Top 10 tips from PBL9 "How to make online collaboration with a diverse group a blessing"**

1. Socialize with group members; Know your group members, their needs, motivations, expectations
2. Establish a common goal trying to meet the personal goals at the same time
3. As a facilitator scaffold the group and nurture the individuals in online environment. Make the group members feel they are irreplaceable, valuable
4. Avoid judging, communicate with respect and show your involvement in the group work and in personal perspectives of the delivered input
5. Be clear about the group norms, values, rules
6. Provide clear structure, show leadership and allow leadership within the group
7. Use headsets and webcams so technical requirements are fulfilled
8. Discuss if you're using the time for discussion about group process or working on a task
9. Keep an eye on the group climate, be positive, understanding, flexible, trustful, responsible
10. Have fun

### **References**

1. Crockett, L., Jukes, I., & Churches, A. (2011). *Digital Literacies is not enough: 21st Century Fluencies for the Digital Age*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
2. National Education Association. Retrieved from <http://www.nea.org/assets/docs/A-Guide-to-Four-Cs.pdf>

3. European Commission (2016) retrieved from <http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1223&langId=en>
4. Scheuermann, L., Taylor, G. (1997). Netiquette. *Internet Research*, 7 (4), 269–273
5. Learning Theories. *Online Disinhibition Effect*. Retrieved from <https://www.learning-theories.com/online-disinhibition-effect-suler.html>
6. Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education model. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), 87-105.
7. Reintes, B., & Rivers, B.A. (2014) Measuring and Understanding Learner Emotions: Evidence and Prospects. *Learning Analytics Review 1*. <http://www.laceproject.eu/publications/learning-analytics-and-emotions.pdf>
8. Management & Business Studies Portal: *Albert Mehrabian: Nonverbal Communication Thinker*. <http://mbsportal.bl.uk/taster/subjareas/busmanhist/mgmtthinkers/mehrabian.aspx>
9. Thompson, J. (2011) Is Non-Verbal Communication a Numbers Game? *Psychology Today*. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/beyond-words/201109/is-nonverbal-communication-numbers-game>
10. Open Network learning Community. Retrieved from <https://opennetworkedlearning.wordpress.com/about-onl/the-onl-story/>
11. Seagal, S., Home D., (1997) *Human Dynamics, samen leven, samen werken*. Scriptum Management. ISBN 905594 118 2
12. Morgan, J. (2015) *Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing, Adjourning*. Retrieved from <https://thefutureorganization.com/forming-storming-norming-performing-adjourning-and-transforming/>
13. Herrington, A., & Herrington, J. (Eds.). (2006). *Authentic learning environments in higher education*. Hershey, PA: Information Science Publishing.
14. Annand, D. (2011) *Social Presence within the Community of Inquiry Framework*. <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/924/1855>
15. Cleveland-Innes, M. and Campbell, P. (2012) *Emotional presence, learning and the Online Learning Environment*, <http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1234/2333>

### Appendix 1 Table “Diversity during collaboration online”:

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1ZVCH3HawGPYux9NnZ1OqUni3KQqzNz94sdteNh5fdAo/edit#gid=0>

### Blogs of PBL9 group members

- Francisca Frenks: <https://www.xwebinar.nl/blog/>
- Gizeh Perez-Tenorio: <https://iwantoknowitall.wordpress.com/>
- Miriam Mosing: <http://miriamannam.blogspot.se/>
- Mohammed Seed Ahmed: <https://mohammedhamzawordpresscom.wordpress.com/>
- Natalia Rivera Sifaki: <http://nvriverablog.wordpress.com>
- Sonja Sharp: <https://thesharpeducator.wordpress.com/>
- Åsa Kneck: <https://learningbykneck.wordpress.com/>