Writing and sharing critical incidents: Computer-supported collaborative writing in vocational education

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Most professional education tracks include the articulation of conceptual school-based teaching and practical workplace training, offering learners with a complete picture of their future profession. In order to benefit from this articulation, learners should build a representation in which conceptual and practical knowledge are integrated, rather than juxtaposed. However, this integration is seldom addressed explicitly either at school or at the workplace, remaining challenging for students. On the basis of three theoretical frameworks: writing-to-learn, collaborative learning, and the integrative pedagogy model (Galbraith, 2009; Dillenbourg & Fisher, 2007; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994; Tynjälä, 2008), we propose to use writing and peer-commenting as mediating tools to support learners in articulating school and the workplace, through the collaborative analysis of critical incidents experienced in practice.

A field study was conducted to evaluate the impact of writing and peer-commenting on learning and self-efficacy beliefs. Two classes (1st and 2nd year) of a vocational school in Health and Social Care (N=40) participated in this study. Learners wrote about a critical incident encountered in the workplace, in relation to a specific professional practice, and received and provided peer-feedback in written and oral format. An online collaborative writing tool (wiki) was used for writing and facilitating participants’ interactions. We expected that writing about a professional experience, followed by guided peer-comments, helped students focusing on deep understanding of the causality and promoting abstraction from individual cases to general situations. In addition, the construction of a collective understanding of diverse individual experiences should support learners’ professional development, measured in terms of apprentices’ self-efficacy beliefs. The understanding of the professional practice and the self-efficacy beliefs were measured before and after the activity.

The results showed a significant increase on participants’ understanding of the professional practice in both 1st and 2nd year classes. Additionally, a positive impact of the intervention on self-efficacy beliefs was observed, but only for the first-year students. Qualitative analyses of the written production and comments are in progress, with the objective of identifying the main features of an effective written dialog. The discussion will address the role of writing in transforming practical experience into conceptual knowledge.