



Introducing Collaborative Learning Logs in a First-Year University Classroom

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In this paper I discuss the introduction of collaborative learning logs in a first-year, content-based, global issues class at a Japanese university. The rationale behind this activity and its connection to autonomous and sociocultural learning is briefly explained, taking the work of Shih (2020) as a starting point. Students' responses to two questionnaires on their attitudes towards the activity are examined. The responses suggest that students generally found the activity to be beneficial to them. Specifically, they felt that it improved their ability to communicate ideas in English and developed their writing skills. Students also commented on the benefits of being able to collaboratively share reflections and ideas about their learning as well as some drawbacks associated with the activity. The paper concludes with ways to improve the activity and suggestions for future research.

本稿では、日本の大学の1年次における内容重視のグローバル・イシューの授業で、共同学習ログを導入したことについて述べる。この活動の根拠と自律学習や社会文化学習との関連について、Shih (2020)の研究を出発点として簡単に説明する。また、この活動に対する学生の態度について、2つの質問紙への回答を検討した。その結果、学生は概ねこの活動が自分にとって有益であると感じており、具体的には、この活動によって、英語で考えを伝える能力やライティング能力が向上したと感じていることがわかった。また、学生たちは、このアクティビティによって、自分の学習についての考察やアイデアを共同で共有できるようになったという利点と、このアクティビティに関連するいくつかの欠点についてもコメントした。最後に、このアクティビティを改善する方法と、今後の研究への提案について述べている。

Having students write reflection logs can be a useful activity for both students and teachers. I have found student reflections useful in providing both an understanding of students' individual learning and the learning of the class as a whole,

which has led to improvements in classroom activities so that they better serve the needs of the students. Initially, I had students write individual reflections. However, after reading a study by Shih (2020), which reported on the use of collaborative reflection logs in a classroom in Taiwan, I decided to try the activity in one of my own first-year university classes. These reflection logs focused on students' perceptions of what they had learned in class and their attitudes towards class activities, such as what they enjoyed, found useful, and found difficult. They also gave the students a forum in which to share ideas with each other. In this paper I briefly discuss my rationale for introducing collaborative reflection logs, followed by a description of the class context in which the reflection task was done. After a brief overview of the activity itself, student responses to questionnaires regarding their attitudes towards doing the activity are explored. I conclude with suggestions for improving the activity and possibilities for further research.

Rationale for Reflective Writing

My interest in learning logs, both collaborative and individual, lies in their potential for stimulating learner autonomy. Huang and Benson (2013), define autonomy as the “*capacity to control one's own learning*” (p. 8, italics added). Capacity indicates the potential of what a person can do, which according to Huang and Benson is different from merely having a set of behaviors that are utilized for learning, meaning that even if the capacity to learn autonomously is present, the student has the choice to become an autonomous learner only if the conditions are right to do so.

According to Dam (2018), a well-known proponent of learning logs, in order to develop a capacity for autonomous learning students need to be aware of what they are doing and why they are doing it with regards to their learning. Through reflective writing, such as that done in a journal or log, students are given a space where they are able to explore aspects of their learning, including cognitive and socioaffective factors,



which can in turn give them a chance to consider different approaches to their personal development as learners (Chau & Cheng, 2012). Candy (1991, cited in Benson 2001) also highlights the role that reflection through learning journals can have in encouraging students to analyze their approach to learning and in seeing the connection between the use of strategies and learning outcomes.

A positive aspect of this is that through reflection and active engagement in their own learning process, students may become more self-confident and motivated, which can lead to better learning outcomes (Amirkhanova et al., 2016). Reflection on what one learns and does in the classroom is also an important part of active learning and a key to meaning-making based on what students have learned, as opposed to simply having meaning handed down by the teacher (Fink, 2013). The connection between students' active involvement and their learning, and the development of students as autonomous learners, is suggested by Little, Lam, and Legenhausen, (2017) who state that, "clearly, the principles of learner involvement and learner reflection are mutually dependent: it is impossible to take charge of one's learning without reflecting on what it entails" (p. 14). This view of student involvement is also supported by Huang and Benson (2013), who argue that having agency in their learning may allow students to be better able to make more informed choices in their study practices and make the material being studied more personally relevant.

Another reason I chose to introduce collaborative logs is the activity's connection to learner autonomy from a sociocultural perspective. As stated by Little (2022), "sharing the initiative in dialogue is a precondition for autonomy in language learning and language use" (p. 65). This view is also supported by Shih (2020), who explains that Vygotsky's (1978, cited in Shih, 2020) zone of proximal development (ZPD) posits a connection between learner autonomy and interdependence. The ZPD places an emphasis on the social environment in which people learn, suggesting that in gaining assistance and support from others, success in learning can be achieved that might not have been possible without it (Hall, 2007). I felt that this reflection activity, by creating spaces for students to interact with and learn from others through shared reflections, would help create the conditions described above.

Context

The collaborative reflection activity was introduced in a first-year content-based global issues class, which met once a week for 14 weeks in a business administration faculty at a Japanese university. The students had experience with reflective writing in that they

had written individual reflection logs the previous semester. Some students in the class had mentioned to me previously that they enjoyed engaging in classroom discussions, especially with students of other cultures, and I thought that collaborative reflective writing would be interesting to them as they would have the chance to read each other's reflections and share ideas. It therefore seemed that this class would be a logical choice for this reflection activity.

There were 30 students in the class, of which 27 completed the activity. The students' English level was within the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) B1-B2 level, with a few students at the C1 level. They ranged in age from 18 to 22 years old, with 14 men and 13 women. The nationalities of the learners were seventeen Japanese students, six Korean, three Chinese, and one Pilipino student.

All 27 students gave permission for their questionnaire answers to be shared, and 26 gave permission for the content of their learning logs to be shared. Permission to use responses and student work for the purposes of this paper was granted by the university where the class was held, and all data regarding students is presented anonymously, with pseudonyms used in place of real names.

The collaborative groups for this project were created by the teacher. This decision was based on my past experience with larger classes, where some students had been left out of groups that the learners organized themselves. I felt that choosing the groups myself would also eliminate any problems of how best to place any students who were absent on the day the groups were chosen. The groups, of three or four learners each, were chosen so as to have a balance of male and female students, and also a mix of Japanese and international students in each group.

Although it would have been possible to give students a choice of doing either an individual or a group reflection log for this activity, as was the case in the study by Shih (2020), all of the students in my class were required to work on collaborative logs. This decision was made due to the fact that the students had already spent the previous semester completing individual logs, and I specifically wanted to investigate their reactions to group-based reflections. I was also interested to see whether and to what extent students could potentially learn from each other, as well as the motivational aspect of using collaborative logs. As Shih remarked, "for collaborative log users, knowing that someone was paying attention to them and cared about them was a positive experience, giving them a sense of achievement" (p. 203).



The Reflective Logbooks

In order for the students to write reflections and share them, logbooks were set up using Google Docs. The layout of the logs follows the example shown in Shih's (2020) study, in which students wrote reflections for that week's activities in columns side by side. Online documents were chosen for the logs as they would allow them to work on their reflections at any time, even simultaneously. Online logs would also make it very easy for students to see and respond to other students' reflections at any time during the week between each class. For an example of students' logs, see Appendix A.

The logs were set up as a space where students could demonstrate their learning to the teacher by providing brief summaries of what they did in class and explaining what activities they found useful. A space on the logs was also provided for students to respond to each other: to acknowledge ideas, thank other students for suggestions, and encourage each other in their studies. In order to make communication between students easier and more accessible, participants were allowed to complete that part of the log entry in either Japanese or in English. Giving the students the choice of language to use was recommended in Shih's (2020) paper. However, students experienced some difficulties in responding to others, as well as personalizing their reflections, so after consulting with other teachers, I introduced a set of questions and sentence stems to help scaffold the writing of responses. These can be seen in Appendix B.

The purpose and procedure for completing the collaborative logs was outlined in the class before the students were expected to write their first reflections, and I reviewed these instructions in the following class when the students were shown their assigned groups and given links to their logs. Emphasis was placed on explaining that logs would give students insight into both their own learning and what other people were learning, and could provide a means for them to recommend activities connected to language learning and researching that worked well for them. It was also explained that any activities done outside of class, even those not connected directly with the global issues class, could be shared in the logs if students felt the activities might be useful and appropriate.

Evaluation

In order to gauge students' enjoyment of the activity and explore the potential connection between collaborative logs and autonomy, data was collected from two questionnaires. The first of these was given in Week 5 after the students had written reflections for 3 weeks, and the second was given in Week 12 after the students had had

the chance to finish nine entries in their logs. On the questionnaires, students were asked to complete 5-point Likert scales for each item. Questions and results for both questionnaires are shown in Appendix C. The students were also given space for open-ended responses in order to explain their answers in more detail, which will be discussed in the next section.

Student Responses

By the end of the course, 14 students completed all nine weeks of journal entries. Out of the twenty-seven participants, only five students made fewer than seven log entries. While it was hoped that students would respond directly to each other, only two groups of students did so regularly in the space provided, with one of these groups using English for this task, and the other using Japanese. Outside of these groups, other students responded directly to each other only infrequently. However, even though responding directly to each other on the logs was infrequent, comments made on the questionnaire indicate that, in general, the students had taken the time to read each other's reflections.

A total of 25 students completed the first questionnaire and 20 students completed the second, with 16 students completing both. The questionnaire provided space for students to elaborate on their answers, which are discussed below. Please note that in reporting on student comments, syntax errors have been left as is, but I have corrected spelling errors for ease of reading. As mentioned previously, pseudonyms have been used in place of students' names to maintain anonymity and are not meant to reflect nationality.

Overall Response

The questionnaire responses suggest that students generally had positive experiences with logs. Some students also clearly remarked on the motivational aspect of doing collaborative logs, which is in line with the views of Amirkhanova et. al. (2016), and Shih (2020). For example, in response to Question 2 ("How much do you like the collaborative learning log?"), Jin wrote, "It motivates me to write, because I feel the sense of responsibility to finish." Cecilia wrote, "other students' advice was really helpful for me to improve my vocabulary and research... I could gain many new vocabulary and knowledge about global issues from collaborative learning log."

Also, responses from the questionnaires indicate that a social space had been created in which students could positively interact and help each other. Dylan highlighted his enjoyment of learning collaboratively: "I enjoy having a short conversation with my



groupmates, it helps me to have a communication with them even for a short while.” In addition, Sarah reported that “the recommendation of other students sound helpful for me, and I am happy to know how hard they are working.” Comments such as these seem to indicate that the collaborative logs created an effective forum for students to actively share ideas with others and potentially assist in each other’s learning.

Questionnaire responses also indicate that sharing ideas in the social space created by the logs spurred improvement in students’ English skills, specifically written communication. As Sarah wrote in the second questionnaire, “explaining my research to other students require abilities to make convincing sentence using suitable and clear words, which allows me to improve my writing skills as well as vocabulary skills.” Kim commented in a similar fashion, “I can practice writing English every week. Others see my log, so I tried to write easier to understand.” In referring to the interactive nature of this activity, students’ comments again highlight a possible link between their development and the social context that was created by using collaborative reflection logs.

Collaborative vs Individual Logs

Regarding the type of reflection that students preferred, responses to Question 1 (“Do you prefer the collaborative learning log to the individual weekly reflection we did last semester?”) showed that over 50% of the students still preferred the individual style logs after 9 weeks of using collaborative logs. Student comments suggest that one reason for this preference was the fact that their reflections were visible to everyone. For instance, Anne wrote in the first questionnaire, “I don’t want other people to see my processing and my frank opinion about my research.” Kenji commented in the second questionnaire that:

Actually, I was little bit shy to write my answers and feelings in the page where everyone can see. Personally, I prefer the former individual style, however, I think it would be great if we had more time to discuss in group discussion sessions.

Comments such as the ones above, although highlighting specific difficulties the students had with collaborative reflection logs, can also be seen as evidence of students becoming aware of their own learning processes as they are clearly commenting on why they preferred certain styles of reflecting on their own development as English learners.

Issues

Although a majority of comments highlighted the positive effects of sharing information with others through logs, one problem that was highlighted by two students was that some group members did not participate as fully as others. Aranya made this point clear when she wrote, “When I see people who doesn’t do the learning log, my passion to do it disappears. I am sorry.”

Students also said that collaborative logs tended to be more work than the individual logs that they had completed the previous semester. Min, writing in the second questionnaire, highlighted these difficulties:

It was very hard to write, because when I write the log after some student finish it, I tend to read other students’ reflection and considering what should I write something that other students did not write about it. However, it takes a many time compared to own reflection sheet. And also, I take a time to write comment to other students.

Although several minutes were given at the end of each class to work on the logs, several comments indicated that it was a lot of work for the students to read the reflections made by others and also to think of something original to contribute to the log. This issue could possibly be overcome by creating a schedule of specific times to write and specific times to respond to others. In order to put more control of the activity in the hands of the students, it would be possible to have students themselves create their own schedule to accomplish this.

As discussed in a previous section, I was able to talk with other teachers about the problem of reflections taking up students’ time and it was recommended to me to provide students with more detailed question prompts and sentence stems to better scaffold the writing of responses. However, implementing this did not seem to change the content of students’ writing very much. It is possible that students’ pattern of reflective writing had been established in the individual logs in the first semester, and this carried over to the collaborative logs, or that students simply did not see the value of using sentence stems and question prompts. Mike commented in the second questionnaire on the usefulness of question prompts and sentence stems, “it is more like motivation problem I guess, not the barrier of English expression.” This problem may be resolved by introducing the sentence stem and question list before students start the writing activity and by using them in verbal discussions about their learning before writing their logs, so that they can get used to using the prompts and possibly see the value in them.



As can be seen from the responses to the questionnaires, students' positive attitudes towards using the logs were generally maintained after 9 weeks of use, although not overwhelmingly so, indicating that this activity may be improved in various ways. The reflections students made on the activity also suggest connections to motivation and student awareness of their own learning, which is an important step in the development of learner autonomy (Dam, 2018). Even comments such as Min's above, in which she takes time to explain difficulties with using the logs, might be seen as evidence of students looking more deeply at processes associated with their own learning.

Implications

The comments students provided about using collaborative logs suggest that they generally responded positively to the experience of doing the activity, although they seemed to find it more demanding than individual logs, which they seemed to prefer.

There are of course ways that the use of collaborative logs can be improved. I recommend that teachers give students time in class to have short discussions in which they can reflect on their learning before writing in the logs. This would give them a chance to get to know each other better, possibly leading to students being able to respond to each other more easily. It could also give them a chance to come up with ideas to write about, thus saving time when writing the logs. I also recommend that questions and sentence stems such as the ones described earlier be introduced at the beginning of this activity and used in student discussions. This will give the participants practice using them, which may make the written portion of the activity easier. Finally, it may help to streamline the activity by setting a timetable for students to write, read, and respond to others' comments. Another idea for adding variety and interest to the activity would be to have students change groups during the semester in order to give them a more robust experience in being able to share their ideas with more classmates.

The findings presented above suggest avenues of further research. Specifically, the connection between learner autonomy and the collaborative reflection activity could be explored in more detail. For the purposes of this paper, I collected information regarding students' enjoyment of the activity, their preferences concerning the type of reflection, individual or collaborative, as well as how useful they felt the activity was. Information regarding student goal setting and its connection to specific learning outcomes was not addressed in this paper, although references to their own development did come out in students' comments. The connection to the socio-cultural aspect of learning through the use of collaborative reflection logs could also be explored in more detail as several

students wrote positive comments highlighting their interest in seeing other students' reflections, and indeed in learning from other students' ideas, while gaining a feeling of motivation through their engagement in the group activity.

Possible research ideas therefore could include a more detailed study of the students' experience of using individual learning logs and collaborative learning logs as well as what they feel are the benefits and drawbacks of each, for example, through the use of interviews and a detailed discourse analysis of the logs themselves. It could also be useful to explore how students might use their logs for goal-setting, and how those goals may be used in the evaluation of the student progress in a course.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Week 1 and Week 8 Examples of Collaborative Learning Logs

Table A1

Example log for a week 1 reflection.

	Student #23	Student #25	Student #13	Student #6
Date	10/7	10/12	10/10	10/12
In class activities: What did you like? What did you learn? Anything you did not like?	We shared our opinion of climate change at breakout room and watched a video about it, which helped me understand the various effects that climate change will bring to us.	I was sharing my opinion with other classmates about climate change in the break out room. Reading the article about climate change helped me deepen my understanding about the cause and the problem.	I was interested in the responsibility for climate change by industry, and I had new findings about it. However, in the video, I could not understand the responsibility of the financial sector for climate change, so I would like to deep dive into the topic.	For this class, we shared our first research notes about climate change through the breakout room. It was very informative and alarming because of the current situation of our globe. I am now interested in the impact of climate change in business and food production.
Out of class activities: Research / language learning. What would you recommend to other students	I think we could pay more attention to the phenomena around us, which will help us understand climate change.	We should be aware about this problem more serious and by having constant conversation, we should widen our point of view to pop out with a great idea.		I think listening to English podcasts can help us to hone our listening skills. You can listen to any topics you are interested in.
Please respond to other students (In English or 日本語)				I want to use your idea, podcasts learning! (Student #23) -Thank you! I hope it can help you (Student #6)



Table A2
Example log for a week 8 reflection.

	Student #23	Student #25	Student #13	Student #6
Date	12/02		12/02	12/02
In class activities: What did you like? What did you learn? Anything you did not like?	I learned what the CSR reports is, and I remembered our accounting class also talked about it this week.		When I was in high school, I was <u>taught</u> CSR in Politics & Economics class. Then I only memorized the term, so I didn't know that detail until watching today's video. Also, I think it is good to make use of companies' CSR reports for working on reports of Economics, Business Administration or Accounting class.	Today, we watched some videos about <u>Coca-cola's</u> CSR reports. I found it interesting and feel grateful because they are doing something to secure our water storage in the future. Because of this I am now curious on how other famous companies do their CSR report.
Out of class activities: Research / language learning. What would you recommend to other students	Don't be shy and feel confident to say English in life.			Lately, I always read books while I'm on the train. It helps me to improve my comprehension skills.
Please respond to other students (In English or 日本語)				I'm interested in novels! So, please tell me <u>your</u> recommend novel! (Student #23)

Appendix B

Question Prompts and Sentence Stems for Aiding Students in Their Reflective Writing

Below is a sample of the question prompts and sentence stems provided to the students to assist them in completing their learning logs.

Making the Reflections More Personal and Interesting

As everyone in class knows the content of the class, the videos we watched etc., it is better to comment on your personal learning. Look at the following questions to help guide you:

- Did you like this week's class? Why or why not?
- What did you find useful or interesting in today's class?
- Was any part of this class difficult for you?
- Did any of the topics inspire you to find out more information?
- Are there any connections between what we did in this class and other classes, or business in general?
- Did you do anything different to improve your performance in class?

Responding to Others

One part of the log that makes this really interesting is the collaborative aspect. Some researchers argue that all learning is social. Let's try to trade ideas and also encourage others to improve! Here are 10 prompts to help you participate in the discussion with others:

- Here is something that I found useful...
- This website was really good for _____
- Why don't you try _____
- I really like _____'s reflection this week because...
- Thank you _____. I tried your idea and...
- That is a really good idea, _____.
- Here is an idea you can try....
- Wow, _____! That sounds really good



- I would like to try _____'s idea
- Thank you for _____, I really appreciate it.

Appendix C

Results of the Two Questionnaires

Table C1

Results of the First Questionnaire, Given After 3 Weeks of Reflection Entries Were Completed

Question 1	Do you prefer the collaborative learning log to the individual weekly reflection we did last semester?				
Answer choices	Yes	No	I need to use it more before deciding		
Results	n = 13	n = 6	n = 6		
Question 2	How much do you like the collaborative learning log? 1 represents not at all, 5 represents very much				
Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Results	n = 2	n = 2	n = 5	n = 14	n = 2
Question 3	How helpful do you think the learning log is for developing your English skills, research skills, and/or global issues knowledge? 1 represents not at all, 5 represents very much				
Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Results	n = 0	n = 3	n = 10	n = 7	n = 5
Question 4	How much effort did you put into your collaborative learning log? 1 represents not at all, 5 represents very much				
Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Results	n = 1	n = 0	n = 8	n = 12	n = 4

Question 5	Do you feel more motivated to learn when you receive feedback from your classmates/teacher? 1 represents not at all, 5 represents very much				
Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Results	n = 1	n = 2	n = 4	n = 7	n = 11

Table C2

Results of the 2nd Questionnaire, Given After 9 Weeks of Reflection Entries Were Completed

Question 1	Do you prefer the collaborative learning log to the individual weekly reflection we did last semester?				
Answer choices	Yes		No		
Results	n = 13		n = 7		
Question 2	How much do you like the collaborative learning log? 1 represents not at all, 5 represents very much				
Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Results	n = 0	n = 3	n = 7	n = 9	n = 1
Question 3	How helpful do you think the learning log is for developing your English skills, research skills, and/or global issues knowledge? 1 represents not at all, 5 represents very much				
Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Results	n = 0	n = 1	n = 7	n = 8	n = 4
Question 4	How much effort did you put into your collaborative learning log? 1 represents not at all, 5 represents very much				
Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Results	n = 1	n = 2	n = 8	n = 5	n = 4



Question 5	Do you feel more motivated to learn when you receive feedback from your classmates? 1 represents not at all, 5 represents very much				
Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Results	n = 0	n = 0	n = 5	n = 7	n = 8

Question 6	Do you feel that the collaborative learning log helped to build relationships with other students in the class? 1 represents not at all, 5 represents very much				
Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Results	n = 2	n = 5	n = 8	n = 5	n = 0

Question 7	Were the question prompts and phrases for using the log helpful? 1 represents not at all, 5 represents very much				
Scale	1	2	3	4	5
Results	n = 0	n = 2	n = 8	n = 6	n = 4
