LEARNING, COLLABORATION AND ASSESSMENT

That collaboration is the heart of CSCL is irrefutable, but defining collaboration is more problematic. Often collaboration will be substituted by an equally ambiguous concept: interaction. Hence, the question remains of what actually happens. Lipponen et al. illustrated in the previous section that any definition of interaction is closely related to the theoretical learning framework that guides research, practice and the primary goal of collaboration.

From the perspective of the acquisition framework, the primary goal of collaboration is individual knowledge gain, whereas the participation framework focuses on sharing and distributing expertise and the knowledge creation framework stresses the continuous advancement of shared knowledge. Note in this respect that the acquisition framework is oriented towards the individual and both other frameworks stress the collective. In spite of the learning framework guiding research and practice, any form of collaborative learning depends upon individuals sharing knowledge with each other and the discourse processes by which they do so.

In Chapter 3 Stahl introduces a theory on ‘building collaborative knowing’. Whereas various theories struggle between the individual and the group as the unit of analysis, are inextricably intertwined in Stahl’s view. Furthermore, Stahl elaborates such concepts (e.g. meaning, interpretation, common ground, negotiation, mediation, internalisation etc.) using two examples, transforming these abstract concepts into a coherent process defined as ‘building collaborative knowing’. Whether or not this theory constitutes a shared basis for CSCL in general, this does not detract from its merits regarding our understanding of knowledge sharing and how this is visible in discourse processes. The use of empirical examples makes these abstract concepts meaningful and useful for researchers and practitioners alike.

Closely related to the collaboration process is the issue of assessment. Though most practitioners will agree that assessment is an integral element of any educational environment, assessment has surprisingly been given very little attention in CSCL research. Nevertheless, Chapter 4 illustrates that assessment cannot only be used for measuring knowledge acquisition, but it can support collaboration. Chan and van Aalst show that from a participation or knowledge creation framework, assessment can be viewed as a ‘formative’ approach to support collaborative learning, as opposed to ‘summative’ assessment that compares individual students’ achievement to standardised criteria. Several examples of summative approaches, such as the use of portfolios, are provided.

Combined, these two chapters illustrate that learning, collaboration and assessment are inseparable and need to be ‘aligned’. Remember that CSCL is all about learning and in this respect no exception to any other approach, thus the problem of ‘whether the tail wags the dog’ should be addressed in CSCL research and practice as well.