WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY ‘SUPPORT’?

Designing support for collaborative learning, as well as determining what kind of support should be provided, requires that we know which aspects of collaboration need to be supported. Hence, support is closely related to what - and how - we expect students to learn. Moreover, support can be provided by various sources: through instruction, computer software and by humans.

Chapter 5 by Järvelä, Häkkinen, Arvaja and Leinonen presents an extensive overview of various approaches to instructional support used in CSCL. Unlike previous collections of methods, these are grouped according to the kind of scaffolding that the instructional support provides, namely social, cognitive, motivational or increased authenticity. They illustrate that these kinds of instructional support can be combined: they are not mutually exclusive. The use of instructional support methods should not be restricted to paradigmatic constraints. Rather, it is a collection of methods that can be applied according to the processes the instructor or designer wants to support (or in their view needs support), but they can also just be provided to enable students to use them according to their needs.

Computer software support is the topic of the second chapter in section three. Frequently, computer-mediated communication (CMC) is taken for granted as a basic condition in CSCL environments. In Chapter 6 Jermann, Soller, and Lesgold illustrate that the function of computer software - be it merely providing communication facilities - determines its application in collaboration. They distinguish two approaches to computer software support: structuring and regulating. Even technology that only facilitates communication affords a specific use and thus structures collaboration. Whether structuring and/or regulating is used, depends foremost on the goal for which CSCL is implemented (again note that not all collaborative settings are identical) and the technology type available.

Chapter 7 by Lund addresses the role of human support in CSCL. Traditionally, human support in collaborative learning is either seen as student-student or teacher-student interaction. The chapter presents a meta-analysis that reveals additional categories of support that have not yet been extensively studied. Meta-support (i.e. support on support) is an especially important extension for CSCL in higher education where the roles of technical expert and teacher are often not combined. Effective use of CSCL pedagogy and technology can be stimulated in a community of teachers, which can be used to clarify what it takes to be an online coach and how the facilitator role can be shaped given the software and instructional support provided. Characteristics of technology influence the possibilities of human support, which again illustrates that implementing CSCL is not limited to introducing a new technological environment.

The three types of support are not mutual exclusive. In fact, most CSCL settings contain elements of all three types - or at least require that all three be considered - and if applicable implemented. Naturally researchers tend to restrict the number of factors involved, but design and implementation of CSCL always involves some instruction, computer software support and the involvement of humans; students, teachers or technical experts.

J. W. Strijbos, P. A. Kirschner & R. L. Martens (eds.), What we know about CSCL, 113