

Project Work Implementation in a Virtual Colombian Public University Environment

Trabajo por proyectos en el entorno virtual de una universidad pública colombiana

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This article is a report of the steps followed in the pedagogical intervention of project work developed with a group of students involved in a virtual program at a public Colombian University. It is part of a wider investigation in which the purpose was to explore and describe the roles of teachers, students and discussion boards while implementing project work. The implementation was based on an adaptation of the Project Planning Form from the Buck Institute for Education. This form allowed doing the project in a procedural and organized way. Based on the achievements of the implementation, I give some recommendations to teacher researchers interested in the field.

Key words: Implementation, pedagogical intervention, project work

Este artículo es un reporte de los pasos que se siguieron en la intervención pedagógica del trabajo por proyectos desarrollado con un grupo de estudiantes de un curso virtual en una universidad pública Colombiana. Esta propuesta es parte de una investigación más amplia cuyo objetivo era explorar y describir el rol de los estudiantes, de los profesores y de los foros de discusión mientras se implementaba el trabajo por proyectos. La implementación se basó en una adaptación del Formato para Planear Proyectos del 'Buck Institute for Education'. Este formato me permitió llevar a cabo el proyecto paso a paso y de forma organizada. Basada en los logros de la implementación, doy algunas recomendaciones a los profesores investigadores interesados en el área.

Palabras clave: implementación, intervención pedagógica, trabajo por proyectos

Introduction

Currently there is an increasing interest in using the virtual modality to teach and learn foreign and second languages. Consequently, Information and Communication Technologies

(ICTs) have become useful means to access information. ICTs have challenged teachers, students and the academic community to develop certain abilities in order to be more competent and to understand how to profit from these new tools for developing better classroom teaching and learning practices.

The challenges faced by teachers and students due to the demands of ICTs, my own experience as a teacher in a virtual environment as well as my students' needs triggered my interest in developing research in this field. Therefore, I carried out an exploratory, descriptive and interpretive study with a group of students engaged in a virtual program at a public university in Bogotá, Colombia. At the university, the Foreign Languages Department leads a program to teach English as a Foreign Language to students from different majors. The program has a face-to-face and a virtual modality.

The purpose of the study was to explore and to provide an explanation of the role that discussion boards, the teacher, the monitors and the students played as they constructed a collaborative class project. In this paper, I will focus on only the construction, implementation and achievements of the class project pedagogical intervention since I know that this sort of implementation can be useful for teachers. Initially, I will describe the context, participants of the study and previous research; then I will define important concepts such as virtual education, discussion boards and project work. Then I will give an account of the steps followed in the pedagogical intervention and its achievements. Finally, I will draw some conclusions and implications for further research.

Context, Participants and Previous Research in the Field

This research took place in a virtual course during the II term of 2010. The aim of the virtual program in which the study was conducted, was and is to generate new spaces to learn English as a foreign language, to promote the use of strategies for the development of a culture of autonomy and to promote language learning through the use of ICTs (translated from Aldana, 2009). It is a blended program that combines face-to-face and virtual learning and in which a head teacher and a monitor are in charge of leading the course. The program has four English language levels and students need to complete four hours in each level. The number of students per course ranges between 25 and 30 students.

The methodology of the program is based on five components (translated from Aldana, 2009):

- a) **Virtual environment:** It is made up of the spaces and applications offered by Blackboard Management Learning System (MLS) and its different tools (discussion boards, chats, interactive learning applications, etc.).

- b) **Weekly activities:** These activities are assigned by teachers and give account of students' learning and understanding of the different components of the contents in the modules.
- c) **Tutorials and work in the Resource Center:** virtual tutorial, face-to-face tutorials, participation in discussion boards and working at the Resource Center.
- d) **Project work:** This allows the students to apply everything they have learnt during the course in a practical way so that during the semester the students build products that evidence their learning.
- e) **Academic and cultural meetings:** This is a space where students have the opportunity to know and show their achievements in the development of the project, the course and other cultural aspects of English speaking countries.

The participants in this research consisted of fifty students from different majors at the university. They belonged to groups one, two, three and five who took the virtual English course level III in the second term of 2010. Two monitors who were undergraduate students from the Philology and Languages Program at the university also supported me in the course implementation.

Some teacher-researchers in the virtual program where I conducted the study have also conducted studies that have allowed us to understand and improve teaching practices in this virtual course. For instance, Barrios (2008) implemented some collaborative strategies with a group of second-level students from the program with the aim of learning what the students' perceptions were in regard to synchronous and asynchronous collaborative work activities. The most interesting finding of the study, and the most striking for my own research, was that during the implementation of strategies, the students preferred to use asynchronous tools, more specifically the discussion boards, because they facilitated their collaborative work. The author affirms that "the implementation of asynchronous activities was a key element in the construction of participants' networks who collaborated with the purpose of getting a common goal" (translated from Barrios, 2008, p. 42).

Medina (2009) also conducted research in the virtual program. She described the interactions that took place between a tutor and the students during online tutoring sessions. The results showed that the topics of the conversations between tutor and students were about the methodology of the course, reflections upon learning and social and personal issues. The researcher suggests teachers to take advantage of the online tutoring "to raise the students' awareness about language learning" (p. 133) so that we can better understand students' strengths and weaknesses.

Cantor (2009) conducted a research project with students from the virtual program in the second semester of 2008 when the program was in the piloting stage. The purpose of the study was to explore the students' perceptions about the use of discussion boards. By analyzing the data collected, the researcher found three main categories in regard to the use of the tool: perceptions, expectations and usage.

As regards perceptions, the students felt that discussion boards allowed them to freely express themselves because nobody judged their opinions and because their participations were validated and graded without a focus on grammar aspects. The students also reported that discussion boards were not useful for developing autonomy mainly because the obligatory participation in discussion boards hinders the development of autonomy. Another important finding in this research was some students' perceptions in regard to the lack of accompaniment and involvement of the teacher in the discussion boards. The students' perception of the topics posted in the discussion boards was positive because they participated frequently and those topics helped them reinforce or review topics studied in the modules.

In terms of expectations, Cantor (2009) found that in coming courses of the program students expected to participate in discussion boards in which they could discuss topics of their interest such as sports, music, literature and science. As for the usage of the tool, the students expressed it was helpful to interact with the teacher and other students, it was easy to use and the participation was constant along the course.

Cantor (2009) concluded that the discussion board "should be given a higher status since it can be a key mediator between teacher-student and student-student" (p. 119) because it helps in the development of collaborative work, autonomy, control over time, amount and quality of interaction as well as tolerance. I agree with Cantor's conclusion because discussion boards are useful means through which teachers and students can communicate and interact constantly, even more when it is not possible to meet students face to face. Additionally, Cantor emphasizes the role the teachers play in discussion boards, particularly when interacting with students, the feedback provided and the fostering of autonomy.

More recently, González (2011) carried out an exploratory case study in the virtual program. The research aimed at describing the students', teachers' and tutors' perceptions in regard to their experience with discussion boards. The study also aimed at identifying and describing the main characteristics, purposes and functions of discussion boards in the program. Through careful data analysis, González found two categories. The first one was related to the interaction component of discussion boards and the second one had to do with the writing skill in discussion boards and their role in the English language learning process.

González' research findings indicate that discussion boards are tools for interaction among teacher/tutor-to-student and student-to-student as well as means to practice writing

skills. The findings suggest that teachers and tutors are supporters and moderators responsible for contacting students and providing timely feedback. According to the researcher, the role of teachers and tutors has a direct impact on students' perceptions towards discussion boards and the program, and these aspects influence their motivation to interact with one another. The researcher also found that while practicing writing skills by participating in discussion boards, the students experienced challenges and difficulties. Students faced those challenges and difficulties due to a lack of clear policies for online discussions, guidelines for participation and grading parameters.

González invites teacher researchers to conduct further studies in order to analyze teachers' challenges in virtual education and how to empower them to take advantage of technology.

After having described the context, participants and previous research, I will now define and explain important concepts in the light of theory. The constructs depicted here complement one other and helped me to understand and develop this research in a better way.

Fundamental Concepts

The term virtual education encompasses varied components and characteristics that have implications and great impact on the teaching and learning fields. Discussion boards and the implementation of project work are just two components of virtual education.

Virtual Education

Virtual education is defined by Cardona (2006) as a revolutionary educational model that is made up of an innovative and flexible curriculum that brings about interactivity in the teaching-learning process thanks to the technological support offered by telecommunication systems, electronic networks, didactic tools and virtual libraries and labs (translated from Cardona, p. 14). On the one hand, Henao (2002) states that a virtual course is one that is fully developed through the Net or that develops a considerable number of sessions supported by that resource. The author asserts that in a virtual course there might be some face to face meetings but most of the instruction is given through the Net (translated from Henao, p. 30). On the other hand, Cebrián (2003) defines a virtual course as a concept in which the Internet is used to support face-to-face teaching. Just as Henao (2002), Cebrián identifies virtual courses in which subjects are mostly taught through the Net, with virtual tutorials, labs, projects, self-evaluation exercises, etc. and which are supported with some face-to-face sessions and courses in which the teaching-learning process is followed exclusively through the Net, with a teacher or tutor who guides the process (translated from Cebrián, p. 75).

The program in which this study was conducted is a blended learning one. García, Ruíz and Domínguez (2007) classify virtual education courses into two models: total e-learning and blended learning. The total e-learning model does not incorporate any face-to-face meeting since the contents, evaluations and tutorials take place virtually. On the other hand, the blended model combines face-to-face and virtual learning. In the blended learning model, the teacher plays an important role as a teaching and learning designer. Thus, teachers in charge of blended learning courses need to have not only technological but also pedagogical knowledge in order to offer high quality learning opportunities to students (translated from García, Ruíz & Domínguez, p. 117).

As mentioned before and in connection with the definition and features of virtual education, discussion boards have gained importance in this field because of their usefulness.

Discussion Boards

In the virtual course, discussion boards have become quite beneficial in order to maintain interaction and communication between learners and teachers. The literature about discussion boards is extensive due to their wide use in virtual education. However, I mention only key definitions here.

According to Bikowski and Kessler (2002), a discussion board is “an electronic forum in which people with common interests can share comments and questions on a specific topic” (p. 39). Halnon (2002) affirms that a discussion board is a “bulletin board where you can leave and expect to see responses to messages you have left” (p. 14). On the other hand, Brito (2004) defines the discussion board as a space where different topics can be discussed. It is useful to find the solution to a problem because there we can find the opinion of different people. The author states that a forum can be used for different purposes like interchanging experiences, reflections, analyses, contrasting opinions and promoting discussions (translated from Brito, paragraph 19).

Besides discussion boards, project work can be incorporated as part of the methodology of virtual education. Teachers make decisions about its use according to students’ needs.

Project Work

Since project work is a broad term that involves many elements in education, I mention here only the definition and characteristics that apply most to this research. Ribé and Vidal (1993) define project work as a full implementation of three types of tasks that they call first generation tasks, second generation tasks and third generation tasks.

First generation tasks aim at developing communicative abilities “in a specific area of the language being taught” (Ribé & Vidal, 1993, p. 2) and second generation tasks focus on

content, procedure and language. Second generation tasks require students to develop language skills and cognitive strategies that allow them to handle, organize and present information. The implementation of second generation tasks permits learners to analyze information they need, select appropriate procedures, collect information, select relevant data, present the data in an organized way and analyze procedures and results.

Ribé and Vidal (1993) affirm that third generation tasks involve language and cognitive strategies, as the previous tasks, and also aim at developing “the personality of the students through the experience of learning a foreign language” (p. 2). These tasks must involve aspects of the individuals’ personalities, previous experience and knowledge. In addition to the previous tasks, the development of projects must contain three additional features: input, processing and output (Ribé & Vidal, p. 2).

During the project development the students need written and oral input and models of oral interaction and written input. As comprehensible input influences language acquisition, so does comprehensible output. Oral and written output takes place along the development of the project, and sometimes it is done by individual students, the teacher or class groups. In addition, content processing allows processing and analyzing the information and extracting specifically what one needs for the project development; language processing involves some sub skills such as lexis and syntax, formulating hypotheses about content, how content is structured and verifying those hypotheses.

Understanding concepts such as virtual education, discussion boards and project work became the pathway to start implementing project work with students in the virtual course. In the following lines I describe how I built and implemented the pedagogical intervention as well as the results gotten from this implementation.

Project Work: Pedagogical Intervention

The pedagogical activities that I designed and implemented by using discussion boards were adapted from the Project Planning Form from the Buck Institute for Education (2010). This is a useful instrument to plan the development of projects with students in a virtual environment. It incorporates the objectives of the project, the technological tools used, the skills the students needed to develop, the assessment criteria and the time spent in the development of the project.

Along the course, the students worked on the creation of a video as part of their class projects. The purpose was to encourage students to work collaboratively in the creation of the video as well as to work on the development of written and oral skills.

The students started to construct their project from the very beginning of the course. Each week a discussion board was posted so that they could be guided step-by-step in the

project development. It was important to start with a discussion in which the students got to know each other and then to start moving little by little to their topic choice, subtopics choice, group formation, creation of a written draft, correction of the draft, video recording, socialization of videos in the academic and cultural meeting and evaluation of the activity.

I organized the contents in the project implementation based on an adaptation of the Project Planning Form from the Buck Institute for Education. Below are the parameters used to plan, implement, assess and evaluate the project implementation. Figure 1 summarizes the parameters.

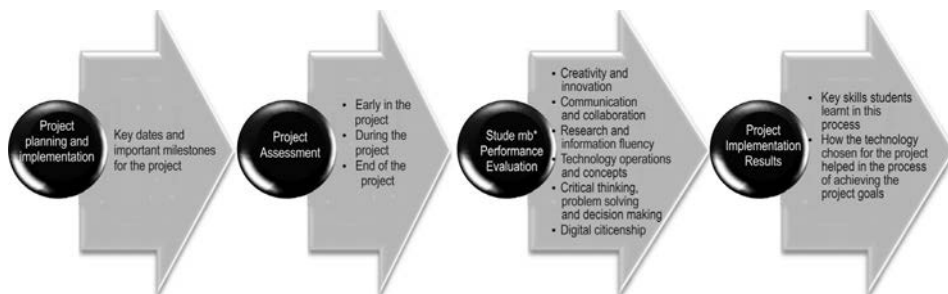


Figure 1. Project Planning Form adaptation

Project Planning and Implementation

Key dates and important milestones for the project. In order to start the project with students, it was important to organize a schedule with the activities to be done. Table 1 is the chronogram of the activities to develop in the project implementation.

All the activities in this virtual course were posted each week so that students had from Monday to Sunday to complete them. Every week we opened a folder with an Orientation Guide in which we gave the students clear instructions of the activities they had to do during that specific week. Every week we posted a discussion board related to the project in which students participated giving their personal opinion or doing specific tasks.

The first activity we implemented in week 1 with the students was introducing themselves (yourself) (see Appendix 1 as a sample). In this discussion board we asked the students to introduce themselves to get to know each other. The idea was to share information such as name, age, career, place they worked (if they worked at that moment); reasons why they decided to take the virtual course, what they liked about virtual technologies, their favorite free time activities and favorite web pages. All the students

Table 1. Project implementation chronogram

Week	Date	Discussion Board Topic
1	August 23rd to 29th	Introducing yourself
2	August 30th to September 5th	Selecting topics to develop the project for the cultural and academic meeting
3 4	September 6th to 19th	Creating a spider web
5 6	September 20 th to October 3 rd	Project: creating the draft
7	October 4 th to 10 th	Feedback on drafts
8 9	October 11 th to 24 th	Completing the project draft
10 11	October 25 th to November 7 th	Recording our videos and uploading them in YouTube
12	November 8 th to 14 th	Virtual academic and cultural meeting
13	November 15 th to 21 st	Evaluating our virtual and academic meeting

registered in the course participated actively. We read the students' participations to get familiarized with their profiles and asked them to read their mates' presentations too.

In week 2 we opened a discussion board in which we invited students to select the topic they liked the most for their project and to say why they liked the selected topic. The name of the discussion board was selecting topics to develop the project for the cultural and academic meeting. We proposed the following topics: celebrations and festivals in Colombia and around the world, sports events in Colombia and around the world, tourist places in Colombia and around the world, The University, a world full of experiences and how useful English is in your majors.

The topics the students liked the most for their projects were tourist places in Colombia and around the world, celebrations and festivals in Colombia and around the world and sports events in Colombia and around the world. Very few of them selected the topics the University and a world full of experiences, and nobody selected the importance of English in their majors. Many of them selected the first topics because they had already travelled to many

places in Colombia and had material to add to their project. The students said they liked to travel and that they would like to show people the richness of our country through this kind of project. Once the students selected the topics of preference, we grouped them according to common likes and published the list in the blackboard platform so that they knew what group they belonged to.

In the discussion board from weeks 3 and 4 we posted the topic creating a spider web. Once grouped, the students participated in this discussion by proposing a spider web with possible subtopics to be developed in the project (see Appendix 2 as a sample). In this forum we attached an example of a spider web as a guide for them to create theirs. When everybody sent their proposals we observed that there was a huge variety of topics, then we decided to summarize all the proposals in a single document in which we tried to incorporate all the students' ideas. Then we published the document so that all the students could view it.

During weeks 5 and 6 we posted on the discussion board: creating the draft. In order for the students to create their draft collaboratively and with the purpose of allowing them to contribute to the group with ideas, we opened a Google Docs word document in which all the students started to construct their drafts as a group (see Appendix 3 as a sample). The Google Docs was embedded to the discussion boards in the Blackboard platform. This allowed the students to create the draft in a single document instead of attaching files to the discussion board. They contributed with different ideas according to their topic selection. The most important advantage of using Google Docs was that all the members of the group had access to the document and could write comments about others' ideas and could write their own ideas based on others' contributions. In the creation of the draft we asked them to write their own ideas, not to copy anything literal from web pages. We also asked them to reference any source they took information from. We devoted week 7 to giving feedback to students' drafts.

During weeks 8 and 9 the students completed their project drafts and participated in the discussion board: completing the project draft. In this discussion we asked the students to incorporate the feedback we gave them in the previous discussion board and also to discuss and agree on some tasks in order to complete their project. They had to agree on who was going to make the introduction and conclusion to the presentation and who was going to edit the video and to upload it in YouTube.

The students spent weeks 10 and 11 recording their videos and publishing them in YouTube. We proposed the discussion board- recording our videos and uploading them in YouTube- so that they knew that they had to spend those weeks doing that specific task.

The Cultural and Academic meeting took place in week 12. We posted the discussion board: virtual academic and cultural meeting (see Appendix 4 as a sample). In this discussion the students participated by observing other groups' videos and writing comments about those videos. We asked them to give their opinion about clarity of ideas in terms of issue

management, grammar, pronunciation, creativity, responsibility, how interesting the presentation was, and other comments they could make.

Finally, in week 13 the students participated in the discussion board evaluating our virtual and academic meeting. In this forum they evaluated their individual and group work along the project development as well as the cultural and academic meeting.

Based on the adaptation of the Project Planning Form, the second step in the process consisted of assessing the students' projects.

Project Assessment and Evaluation

Students were assessed and evaluated early, during and at the end of the elaboration of their projects.

Step 1. The products for the project. What was assessed and evaluated?

Early in the project. In the first stage, the students' discussion and agreements in regard to topic and content selection were assessed and evaluated. They were given a scaled grade from 1 to 100 for their participation in the selection of the topic from the ones proposed and also the selection of subtopics that were going to be included.

During the project. The students presented the first draft of the document with the main information they would include in the video. Not only the tutor but also the students themselves were in charge of providing feedback to the written draft of the project.

End of the project. At the end the students recorded their videos, uploaded them in YouTube and then those videos were published in the Blackboard platform. The videos were assessed taking into account the criteria described below. The students also evaluated their partners' products through the discussion board.

Step 2. The criteria for exemplary performance for each product.

Product: Draft Criteria

- ✓ Writes cohesive and coherent ideas using connectors and punctuation.
- ✓ Uses appropriate vocabulary and grammar structures.
- ✓ Summarizes ideas well in the text.
- ✓ Incorporates sources.

Product: Video Criteria

- ✓ Incorporates the corrections previously made in the draft.
- ✓ Pronounces words accurately.
- ✓ Speaks fluently.
- ✓ Intonation is appropriate.
- ✓ Speech is coherent and cohesive.

- ✓ Appears in the video.
- ✓ Uses pictures to support the ideas presented in the video.
- ✓ Shows confidence when speaking.

After assessing and evaluating the students' progress, their projects and performance were evaluated according to some standards, as proposed in the Project Planning Form from the Buck Institute for Education. These standards indicate what was achieved after the project implementation in the virtual course.

Students' Performance

The Project Planning Form from the Buck Institute for Education suggests evaluating students according to The International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE, 2007). ISTE proposes a set of standards that the students must meet as they work on the elaboration of projects in a virtual environment. Here I explain how my students achieved those standards along the process.

Creativity and innovation. Students demonstrate creative thinking, construct knowledge, and develop innovative products and processes using technology. By using their previous knowledge as well as the knowledge gained along the course, not only in terms of language but also in terms of technology use, the students were able to create an original product (video) which was well written, well recorded and containing useful information so that it was attractive for them and for the rest of the students. Since it was a collaborative project work, knowledge construction was evidenced along the process.

Communication and collaboration. Students use digital media and environments to communicate and work collaboratively, including at a distance, to support individual learning and contribute to the learning of others. The students communicated, interacted and worked collaboratively in the construction of the video by participating in discussion boards.

Research and information fluency. Students apply digital tools to gather, evaluate, and use information. The students located, organized, analyzed, evaluated, synthesized and ethically used the information they got on the web. This was one of the requirements for the development of the project.

Technology operations and concepts. Students demonstrate a sound understanding of technology concepts, systems, and operations. The students were able to effectively use these tools: discussion board, Movie Maker, PowerPoint, Word, Google Docs and YouTube. They needed to use these technological tools productively in order to create the final product. They also needed to make decisions about what, why and how to present the information in the video.

Critical thinking, problem solving and decision making. Students use critical thinking skills to plan and conduct research, manage projects, solve problems, and make informed decisions using appropriate digital tools and resources. Students had to be responsible for the information they included taking into account copyright, safety, legal and ethical issues. One of the requirements was to cite or to reference the information they incorporated in their projects.

Digital citizenship. Students understand human, cultural, and societal issues related to technology and practice legal and ethical behavior. The students developed a positive attitude mainly towards the use of discussion boards that support collaboration, learning and productivity. They also demonstrated leadership and responsibility for their long-life learning.

Project Implementation Results

Key skills students learnt in this project. The students developed written as well as oral skills. In terms of written production, students were able to create their own texts thanks to the guidelines provided at the beginning of the process. The creation of a spider web to brainstorm ideas, the creation of the draft, the draft revision and the final document served as helpful steps for students to create their own texts. In addition, students integrated vocabulary according to topic selection and used grammar structures previously studied in the course. Creating their texts first before recording the videos let students work on oral production components such as pronunciation, fluency and organization of ideas. It facilitated the recording of the videos because students felt more confident when talking in front of their camera.

How the technology chosen for the project helped in the process of achieving the project goals. In order to develop the project, we used different technological tools such as discussion boards, Word, PowerPoint, Google Docs, Movie Maker and YouTube. The discussion boards were a useful tool to group students, to construct the project collaboratively and to work on the ideas that would be incorporated in the video. Word and PowerPoint were used to attach files that were heavier or texts that were longer, whereas Google Docs was a useful tool that allowed the students to elaborate their texts and to summarize ideas so that everybody could have access to a single document. Windows Movie Maker was used to edit the videos so that those could be published in the online rooms. YouTube was used to publish the final product (video) and to comment on each other's videos.

Conclusions and Suggestions for Further Research

The implementation of project work in a virtual environment can be significant for both teachers and students. Accordingly, this implementation unveiled a series of steps that can be used or adapted by teachers to guide students in the development of project work in a virtual

class. Moreover, this implementation suggests that project work in a virtual environment can be used as an approach to foster collaboration and the development of written and oral skills.

The adaptation and implementation of the Project Planning Form allowed me to guide students in planning, implementing, assessing and evaluating their projects. At the same time, it let students do their projects through guided and organized tasks from the beginning until the end of the process. The development of the project through specific tasks posted in discussion boards every week gave students time to work on the elaboration of their own texts and their oral skills. Likewise, discussion boards became a useful tool for students to work with peers in a more collaborative way along the process.

In general, project work implementation in the virtual class worked well as the teacher and students could monitor the process. Besides, it was possible to use technological tools to achieve the project goals. However, it does not mean that project work has to be implemented in virtual courses at any cost. It is necessary to be aware of students' differences in terms of learning styles, English language proficiency level and management of technology. If those factors are not taken into account as projects are implemented, students can be frustrated and the purpose of the project can get lost.

In contrast, the aim of implementing project work should be to establish an atmosphere in which all students' learning differences are respected and taken into account. Students need to be informed about the goals of project work and teachers need to be prepared to support everyone in the process.

Project work is an important component of a virtual program. Therefore, I suggest doing more research in this field. Teachers interested in doing research on project work could improve the adaptation and implementation of the Project Planning Form. Future studies could place more emphasis on assessment procedures as well as the promotion of creativity, innovation, technology use, critical thinking and problem solving. Learners could also profit from research in which technology can be used as a means to help them improve their written and oral skills. Through project work teachers could also conduct research in which technology can be used as a tool to foster more collaboration among students in a virtual environment. All in all, before conducting research it is paramount to determine what the students' needs are and the program curriculum demands. Thus, research processes are better carried out on behalf of teachers, students and the academic community.

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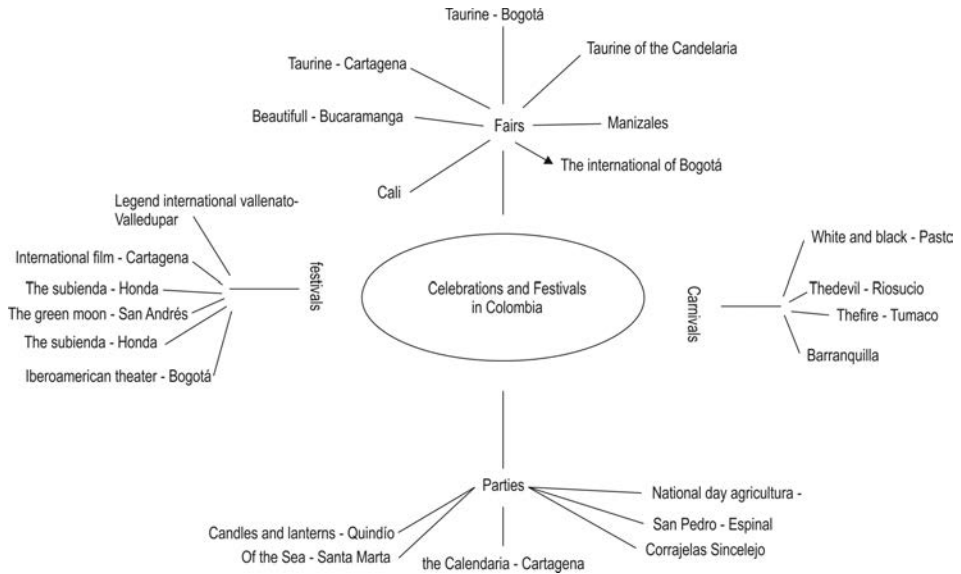
Appendix 1

Sample of Students' Participation in Discussion Board: Introducing Yourself

The screenshot displays the UNvirtual platform interface. On the left is a sidebar menu with options: Anuncios, Actividades, Guía Estudiante, Módulos Virtuales, Tutoría Presencial, Tutoría en línea, Clubes de Práctica, Evaluaciones, Foros, Audio Foros, Mis Calificaciones, Interacción Semanal, Cronograma, Mis Compañeros, Mi Profesor, Learn and Help, and Materiales del curso. The main content area is titled 'Universidad Nacional' and 'Cursos'. It shows a sequence of posts with the title 'What's up' by Juan Pablo Rodríguez Hernández, dated 11/09/10 17:11. Below the post title, there are statistics: 'Publicaciones totales: 1' and 'Publicaciones sin leer: 0'. The post content reads: 'Hello class, I'm Juan [redacted] an average student of systems engineering, coursing seventh semester and working as an teacher's assistant at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia. I chose this virtual course because I don't have much time going to classroom and I need to complete the English levels as soon as I can. I like rock music, honor movies and learn so much about my career. My favorite web site is Radioactiva.com.' The post has 20 views and 9 likes. At the bottom, there are buttons for 'Responder', 'Espacio', 'Modificar', 'Definir indicador', and 'Eliminar'.

Appendix 2

Sample of Students' Participation in Discussion Board: Creation of a Spider Web



Appendix 3

Sample of Students' Participation in Discussion Board: Creation of a Draft

The screenshot displays the Blackboard Academic Suite interface. On the left is a navigation menu with various links like 'Anuncios', 'Actividades', 'Guía Estudiante', etc. The main area shows a Google Docs editor window. The document title is 'GROUP 2 SPIDER WEB SUMMARY (1)'. The content of the document is as follows:

TOURIST PLACES IN CUNDINAMARCA, TOLIMA AND BOYACA

INTRODUCTION (Yennifer)

Colombia is one of the most beautiful countries in the world. Colombian beaches are the most frequently visited by all the tourist from around the world, nevertheless there are many natural paradise for visit specially in the zone of Tolima, Cundinamarca and Boyacá. In this places you can make many activities from Canotage(WW)to Rafting. You can also visit the desert or the coldest places as the Nevado de Ruiz.

PRETTIEST VILLAGES (Luis)

- Villa de Leyva (Boyacá)

Villa de Leyva is one of the most beautiful and preserved colonial cities in Colombia. There are a lot of places that we can visit, for example:

- PARISH CHURCH: It was built in 1604, built of rocks and bricks, it has two windows crowned with arches with a colonial style

