

Investigating Possibilities to Provide Collaborative Learning Spaces in Libraries for Children with Special Needs

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Abstract: While opportunities for technology-based collaborative learning have reached out to a large majority of the community, not everyone has been able to benefit from the growth of collaborative learning. Computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL), in particular, has great potential for children with special needs in terms of building social interaction and collaborative skills through the use of various information and communication technology (ICT) tools. This paper presents a preliminary investigation on how library spaces could be utilised to encourage collaborative learning skills for children with special needs. Gaps in literature with regards to the usage of library spaces for this purpose as well as the limitations of current tools in terms of language diversity are also explored. Future research directions are also presented to position plausible strategies to use libraries as spaces for collaborative learning for children with special needs, using appropriate tools to support their learning process and experience.

Keywords: children with special needs; library spaces; collaborative learning; ASD; CSCL

1. Introduction

Collaborative learning as an effective learning method is increasing in popularity as rapid advancements of technology have enabled communities all over the world today to collaborate as a group in various fields and areas of interest at literally a click of a button. Collaborative learning is very much grounded in the social theory of learning and has a large focus on the idea of meaning making within a group of learners (Stahl, 2005) as well as in the social constructivist theory which strongly emphasises on “human dialogue, negotiation and collaboration” (Bonk & Cunningham, n.d.). While these collaborative learning opportunities have reached out to a large number of people, there still exist groups of people who have yet to benefit from the full potential of technology for learning – children with special needs.

Individuals with special needs is defined as persons with a “diverse range of needs often caused by a medical, physical, mental or developmental condition or disability” and can “include cognitive difficulties, physical or sensory difficulties, emotional and behavioral difficulties, and difficulties with speech and language” (Special, n.d.). Previous research has also been indicated that the environment around children with special needs is not always conducive for their learning needs and can prove to be extremely challenging for them (Alper, Hourcade, & Gilutz, 2012). Interactive technologies can be seen to be able to ‘play a positive role in helping children manage these challenges, from communicating with others, to learning in school, to experiencing and enjoying the world’ (Alper, Hourcade, & Gilutz, 2012, p.1). While there are various conditions classified under the term ‘special needs’, this paper concentrates on children who have been diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD).