Collaborative forum promoting students' engagement using effective feedback and encouragement

Foro colaborativo que promueve la participación estudiantil mediante retroalimentación efectiva y motivación

Jenny Emilce Ordoñez Muñoz[1]
Docente, Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia, Colombia.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0000-5421-6585
e-mail: jenny.ordonez@unad.edu.co

Yaneth Liliana Burbano[2]
Docente, Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia, Colombia.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0004-8944-9994
e-mail: yaneth.burbano@unad.edu.co

Karen Vanessa Fonseca Bravo[3]
Docente, Universidad Nacional Abierta y a Distancia, Colombia.
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-1349-2528
e-mail: karen.fonseca@unad.edu.co

1   She is a lecturer at INVIL and a researcher in the IGPI research seedbed. Holds a Bachelor's in Basic Education with emphasis in Humanities, Spanish, and English (University of Nariño) and a Master's in Educational Technology Management (University of Santander). Occasional lecturer at UNAD, Colombia.

2   She holds a Master's in Educational Knowledge Management (Catholic University of Manizales), and a bachelor's in Modern Languages, English–French (University of Cauca). Occasional lecturer at the National Open and Distance University of Colombia (UNAD).

3   She is a lecturer and a researcher at INVIL and IGPI. She holds a Bachelor's in Basic Education with emphasis in Spanish and English (University of Cauca) and a Master's in Education (Ibero-American University Corporation). Occasional lecturer at UNAD, Colombia.

Fuente: https://www.freepik.es/vectores#from_elemen

ABSTRACT

This short article presents the preliminary results of an investigation into the role of collaborative forums in virtual education. These forums are fundamental tools because they facilitate interaction, reflection, and the construction of knowledge. Previous studies show that they promote not only participation but also collaborative learning when they have effective feedback and clear communication strategies. However, there are challenges related to quality, motivation, and coherence between interaction and learning outcomes. The objective of this study is to analyze what the collaborative forum requires to become a tool that strengthens autonomous learning within the UNAD heutagogical model, focused on learning to learn. The study employs a qualitative methodology based on open interviews with four tutors and three students to explore perceptions about quality, the role of feedback, and aspects that can be improved. Preliminary results indicate that student participation is essential to generate a sense of belonging and promote participation. However, the small sample and qualitative nature limit the generalization of the findings, which are based on subjective perceptions. Finally, it is highlighted that the tutor's affective feedback—expressed with attention and closeness—is key to strengthening confidence, motivating the student, and promoting their learning.

Keywords:
collaborative learning; feedback; online forums; virtual education

RESUMEN

Este artículo corto presenta los resultados preliminares de una investigación sobre el papel de los foros colaborativos en la educación virtual. Estos foros son herramientas fundamentales porque facilitan la interacción, la reflexión y la construcción del conocimiento. Estudios previos muestran que no solo promueven la participación, sino también el aprendizaje colaborativo cuando cuentan con retroalimentación efectiva y estrategias de comunicación claras. Sin embargo, existen desafíos relacionados con calidad, motivación y la coherencia entre la interacción y los resultados de aprendizaje.

El objetivo de este estudio es analizar qué requiere el foro colaborativo para convertirse en una herramienta que fortalezca el aprendizaje autónomo dentro del modelo heutagógico de la UNAD, centrado en aprender a aprender. El estudio emplea una metodología cualitativa basada en entrevistas abiertas a cuatro tutores y tres estudiantes con el fin de explorar percepciones sobre la calidad, el papel de la retroalimentación y los aspectos a mejorar. Los resultados preliminares indican que la participación estudiantil es esencial para generar un sentido de pertenencia y promover la participación. No obstante, la muestra pequeña y el carácter cualitativo limitan la generalización de los hallazgos, que están basados en percepciones subjetivas. Finalmente, se destaca que la retroalimentación afectiva del tutor —expresada con atención y cercanía— es clave para fortalecer la confianza, motivar al estudiante y favorecer su aprendizaje.

Palabras clave:
aprendizaje colaborativo; retroalimentación; foros en línea; educación virtual

INTRODUCTION

Collaborative forums enhance participation and collaborative learning when supported by effective feedback and clear communication strategies. However, students do not participate actively in building the tasks of the courses through them. This study aims to explore how collaborative forums can become effective tools for promoting autonomous learning within UNAD's heutagogical model through the consideration of the dimensions and the promotion of interpersonal skills development. Using a qualitative methodology, the viewpoints of the four tutors and the three students were collected through open-ended questions via interviews in the research, focusing on opportunities for improvement, the role of feedback, and the quality of the forum. Findings highlight the fundamental role of student participation in promoting dynamic commitment in learning environments and an outstanding sense of belonging, emphasizing support and encouragement from the tutor and attention to students' processes.

A collaborative forum is a space inside UNAD where five students and their tutor come together to work and share knowledge. These forums can be designed to foster collaboration, which is the model of the University, and engage the student in the cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social, collaborative, and technological fields. Heutagogy encourages learners to set goals, select resources, and evaluate outcomes, fostering adaptability and lifelong learning (Blaschke, 2012). Heutagogy supports active participation, knowledge construction, and meaningful interaction within digital and collaborative contexts. Its approach emphasizes interpersonal meaning creation in online forums, as presented at UNAD.

Collaborative forums allow group discussions, evaluation of peer contributions, or reaching consensus on solutions to real or simulated problems, depending on the activities, which most of the time are formulated in a learning guide. Tran and Nagirikandalage (2025) showed that creating student-based videos and facilitating team discussions enhanced six dimensions of student engagement: cognitive, behavioral, emotional, social, collaborative, and technological. This study takes place in the third and fourth dimensions, which concern the emotional state in which the members of the forum interact. Naeem et al. (2025) emphasize the social and emotional dimensions of learning because these factors can maintain motivation, engagement, and collaboration in learning environments. Forums should not only address cognitive needs but also support learners' emotional well-being and sense of social connection.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Forums at UNAD should promote the two dimensions outlined in Table 1, as the others are being addressed quietly. UNAD leads the virtual field with an online campus that contains cognitive, technological, and collaborative tools, which include rules that outline behavioral guidelines.

Table 1. *Dimensions of the Collaborative Forum*

Dimension	Description
Cognitive	How much knowledge the student has
Behavioral	The attitude the student has when contributing
Emotional	How much the tutor and director motivate the student
Social	How much the student interacts
Collaborative	How much work is done by teams
Technological	How well the student manages the platform

Note. Dimensions and definitions created by the authors.

The strategy of student-led discussions is not new—it gives educators, scholars, and practitioners a valuable reference point for fostering interpersonal skills and nuanced understandings, crucial for sustainable development. Nonetheless, it is sometimes necessary for teachers to provide guidelines to students with orienting questions to initiate the forum at a certain point through Socratic debate. By combining educational theory with experiences, this article presents new perspectives on how guided discussions are an effective way to foster key sustainability skills in higher education, as well as a valuable resource for educators, academics, and professionals to promote interpersonal skills and nuanced understandings, which are essential for sustainable development.

Fostering interpersonal skills in UNAD's collaborative forums requires intentional language modeling, dialogic task design, and reflective engagement, ensuring that learners not only exchange knowledge but also build a supportive online learning community, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Fostering Interpersonal Skills in a Collaborative Forum at UNAD*

Interpersonal Skills	Description
Modelling Interpersonal Language	Tutors demonstrate how to express agreement, disagreement, appreciation, and constructive feedback.
Designing Interaction-rich Tasks	Courses can require peer negotiation, joint problem-solving, or perspective-taking to stimulate empathy and cooperation.

Interpersonal Skills	Description
Providing Feedback on Interaction	Assessment and feedback can evaluate interpersonal contributions.
Promoting Reflective Practice	Students can be guided to reflect on their communicative choices—how they engage with others, manage disagreement, and express solidarity—thereby strengthening emotional intelligence and online social presence.
Integrating Technological Scaffolds	Using adaptive feedback tools or analytics can help identify students who may be isolated or disengaged, prompting targeted support to enhance their participation and sense of belonging.

Note. Interpersonal skills selected by the authors.

From the interpersonal skills listed in Table 2, there is an imperative need to work on the use of explicit empathy in the written participations that can be done in the collaborative forum while developing the activities in the learning guides provided by tutors.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative methodology with a descriptive ethnographic approach. Three interviews were conducted with three tutors from "Centro de Educación Abierta y Distancia (CEAD) Popayán", and four interviews with students. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns and insights from the responses, focusing on three categories derived from the literature: collaborative learning, quality, and feedback. The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, involving data familiarization, coding, theme identification, and refinement. First, key concepts related to quality and feedback were gathered from the literature review to establish initial analytical categories (see Table 3). Then, textual data from teacher and student perspectives were coded according to recurring linguistic and semantic patterns. For instance, teacher responses frequently emphasized "integral teaching," "responsibility," and "guidance," while student responses focused on "motivation," "participation," and "feedback."

These codes were then organized into broader categories that represented common opinions about quality and feedback in online learning. To ensure validity, two independent reviewers examined the codes, and differences were resolved through discussion. Data management was performed using an organizing-code spreadsheet, frequency counts, and representative extracts.

Reeves et al. (2008) defined ethnography as the study of social interactions, behaviors, and perceptions that occur within groups, teams, organizations, and communities.

In this project, the beliefs of three tutors and four students are gathered in terms of perceptions when working in the collaborative forum. This project is developed through five interviews with tutors from CEAD Popayán, aged between 40 and 50, who work for Escuela de Ciencias Básicas, Tecnología e Ingeniería (ECBTI) and Escuela de Ciencias de la Educación (ECEDU), and monitors of the CEAD Popayán between 16 and 45 years old, whose functions are assessing students who lack knowledge in systems, unit contents, and academic fields. The technique used is the interview as defined by Kvale, cited by Ruslin et al. (2022), as a mode of human interaction and a conversation that allows the researcher to get to know people, learn about their experiences, feelings, expectations, and understand their world.

PRELIMINARY OR PARTIAL RESULTS

From the information gathered and the results provided, there is evidence that tutors really want the forum to work well. However, 33% of the students say the forum does not work. The reason given by Student 1 (S1) is that there is no quality, suggesting that quality overcomes quantity in his perception. S1, S2, and S3 agree that they are looking for at least a sufficient grade. Finally, S3 argues that if a tutor gives quality feedback on time, the student will feel more motivated to participate in the collaborative forum. The guidelines provided by authors are clear and practical for conducting thematic analysis in a deliberate and rigorous manner, and they address the potential challenges associated with their implementation. Additionally, they discuss both the strengths and limitations of thematic analysis and argue for its value as a versatile and effective method for qualitative research within and outside the field of psychology. When applying the interviews, the themes selected in the literature review, which were collaborative learning, quality, and feedback, are not clearly defined by the subjects of this research. This indicates the need to include related words derived from the teachers' point of view to generate new themes or topics. However, teachers' discourse tends to remain at a general pedagogical level and does not explicitly address students as subjects of analysis. For this reason, teachers are not able to discuss students in a direct or analytical manner, which draws the researchers' attention to the necessity of applying the techniques and instruments directly with a group of students at CEAD Popayán. The analysis conducted is presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3. *Thematic Analysis*

Topics gathered from the literature review	Related words from the teachers' point of view	Related words from the students' point of view
Quality	Comprehensive education	Theme
	Meaningful learning	Participation
	Student effort and responsibility	Cordiality
	Formulating questions	Kindness
	Want to learn more	Participation
	Teacher support and guidance	Feedback
	Retaining the student	Motivation
Feedback	It promotes learning	Motivation
	Development of communication skills	
	Promoting understanding	Clarity
	Group learning	Specificity
	Respectful correction	Personal experiences
	Visibility of progress	Diverse points of view
	Student assessment	

Note. Participant excerpts were gathered from the instruments applied.

PRELIMINARY CONCLUSIONS

This study offers partial but meaningful insights into the dynamics of virtual collaboration by highlighting the importance of social and emotional dimensions, as well as the interpersonal skills that motivate the students' participation in the collaborative forums in UNAD.

For UNAD tutors, these findings suggest that the quality of tutors' feedback and time of response must consider the social and emotional dimensions, and tutors must use the forum as a participation scenario that requires the students' and tutors' commitment, engagement, and will. The lack of engagement from either students or tutors results in low grades due to a lack of interest in the learning process. Therefore, it would be necessary for tutors to develop strategies that enhance students' metacognitive actions.

These results provide a foundation for the next phase of the research, which will involve an analysis of forum interactions to explore how interpersonal skills evolve over time. The emerging themes will inform the development of pedagogical strategies and

training resources aimed at strengthening online collaboration within UNAD's virtual learning model.

REFERENCES

Blaschke, L. M. (2012). Heutagogy and lifelong learning: A review of heutagogical practice and self-determined learning. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 13*(1), 56-71. https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v13i1.1076

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative research in Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Naeem, M. R., Khan, M. A., Khan, M., Alruwaili, O., Alrashdi, I., & Alanazi, S. (2025). Enhancing software quality assurance in ubiquitous learning environments through mutation testing and diverse test oracles. *Computers in Human Behavior, 163*, 108493. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2024.108493

Reeves, S., Kuper, A., & Hodges, B. D. (2008). Qualitative research methodologies: *Ethnography. BMJ: British Medical Journal, 337.* http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.a1020

Ruslin, R., Mashuri, S., Rasak, M. S. A., Alhabsyi, F., & Syam, H. (2022). Semi-structured interview: A methodological reflection on the development of a qualitative research instrument in educational studies Ruslin. *IOSR Journal of Research & Method in Education (IOSR-JRME), 12*(1), 22-29. http://dx.doi.org/10.9790/7388-1201052229

Tran, T. T., & Nagirikandalage, P. (2025). Insights into enhancing student engagement: a practical application of blended learning. *The International Journal of Management Education, 23*(2), 101167. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijme.2025.101167