

COLLABORATION in Online Learning

From [Palloff & Pratt "Building Online Learning Communities"](#) p180 - 184

The online environment is perfect for the development of collaborative skills. Students learn to work with and depend on each other to reach their learning objectives and enhance the outcome of the process. Other forms of collaboration, however, can be promoted in this environment—forms with the potential to expand the level of learning achieved. Some of those are intergroup collaboration, resource sharing, and collaborative writing.

Intergroup Collaboration

The vastness of the Internet allows us to connect with individuals and groups all over the world. Exposure to some of these individuals and groups can provide students with a deeper understanding of the subject they are studying, allow them to develop greater facility with online research, and create connections that can serve them long after a course ends. Instructors should include assignments in their courses that push students to explore the Internet as a resource. An example of this type of assignment would be to find a website that deals with a particular element or topic being discussed. In our class titled "The Search for Soul and Spirit in the Workplace" we asked students to find a website dealing with spiritual issues, write a paper about what they found, and post that paper to the course site. One student got so excited about what she found "out there" that she ended up visiting seven or eight websites to complete the assignment. In an undergraduate class on organizational behavior, students were asked to visit a site that was related to power and politics and post the address of that site with a brief description to the course site. As the result of being given that assignment, one student commented that he now uses the Internet as a resource for doing research for his other classes as well.

What we are doing by encouraging students to explore the Internet is promoting collaboration with other learning communities around the globe. Instructors can also facilitate that type of collaboration by creating connections among groups of students enrolled in different courses. In other words, if two sections of the same course are operating at the same time, or if an instructor is teaching two courses that are interrelated, students enrolled in both can be given opportunities to interact; this mimics the development of residential learning communities on college campuses. In these communities, instructors from two different disciplines may join together to offer a joint exploration of a topic from the perspective of those disciplines. In the case of online collaboration, one group could prepare and present to the other group on a topic of mutual interest and concern.

Furthermore, instructors can promote collaboration with colleagues at other universities and the students in their classes. Some ways to facilitate this process include (1) providing a list of e-mail addresses of instructors or students in another university who are interested in receiving messages from members of the group, (2) creating a common discussion area that can be accessed by participants and visitors, (3) creating and posting a list of websites of interest, and (4) presenting "guest speakers" to the group online.

Glogoff (2005) describes a very creative approach to intergroup collaboration through the use of blogs. Blogs, or Web Logs, are an online journal of sorts. Blogs are websites where links are posted, commentary and opinions expressed, and any other material that the owner of the blog chooses to post. Glogoff created a blog for his course in Decision-Making for Information Professionals and created spaces for his students to develop their own blogs. He encouraged his students to publish their assignments to their blogs as well as commenting on his blog and those of others. He also invited guest speakers and experts in the field to engage with the students around their blogs. He notes that this learner-centered approach helped increase the level of discussion in the course as well as providing the opportunity for students to collaborate with professionals in the field.

Involving the participants in developing these possibilities helps make this type of collaboration more meaningful to them. The possibilities are limitless and can greatly enhance the educational experience.

Resource Sharing

The assignments we just described have the additional component of allowing students to share resources—Internet resources as well as readings. In this way, a greatly expanded bibliography of readings can be developed to allow students to explore far beyond the confines of the readings assigned for the course. A separate area of the course site can be created to house this growing list so that students can add to it and refer back to it whenever they choose. Expanding the resources in this way encourages students to take greater responsibility for their own learning and allows the instructor to act as an equal participant.

Collaborative Writing

Technology in its various forms makes the transmission of documents easy. Students can work together or with an instructor to complete course assignments, usually by sending documents between or among participants. E-mail, as well as the ability to attach documents to posts on a course site, has been extremely useful in composition courses conducted online, as well as in the completion of team learning assignments. In addition, whiteboarding software in a course allows for brainstorming sessions and for completing collaborative work by simulating what might occur in a face-to-face session. Requiring students to complete papers collaboratively and evaluating that work on a group basis also promotes interdependence.

Other Forms of Collaboration

It is clear at this point that there are numerous ways in which an instructor can create collaboration online, regardless of the content area being studied. Here are some of the suggestions we have discussed:

- Small-group assignments

- Research assignments asking students to seek out and present additional resource material to their peers
- Group work on case studies
- Simulations
- Shared facilitation
- Homework forums
- Asynchronous discussion of the reading and discussion questions
- Papers posted to the course site with mutual feedback provided

Newer forms of technology are allowing us to creatively add to this list and include the following:

- Blogs, or online journals or Web Logs, where students can reflect and invite comment on those reflections
- Wikis or collaboratively created Web pages
- Jigsaw activities where students are either assigned or choose a piece of a search puzzle and collaborate to bring the information together
- WebQuests, where teams of students are sent on an Internet-based search hunt, the result being a comprehensive presentation or solution to a problem
- Learning cycles that allow students to progress through a series of activities resulting in increasing skill acquisition

Regardless of the way in which collaboration is used, it is critical for the instructor to set the stage for it through the formation of a solid learning community. Although collaboration helps shore up the foundation of that learning community, the presence of community certainly helps facilitate successful completion of collaborative work.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Collaboration and the ability to promote interdependence is a critical element in formation of an online learning community. Consequently, it is important that the instructor in an online course pay close attention to ways collaboration can be incorporated and facilitated throughout the course. The inability to promote collaboration in this environment generally results in low levels of participation and in two-way interactions between the instructor and any given student. Collaborative work also forms the basis for the student's ability to engage in a transformative learning process—the topic of the next chapter. The questions that follow are designed to help instructors think about ways to incorporate collaboration into the planning for an online course.

GUIDING QUESTIONS TO PROMOTE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

The following questions are designed to assist in the development of a collaborative learning approach in online courses. Just as with all other aspects of an online class, collaborative learning must be planned and purposefully facilitated. These questions should help create a planning process whereby these goals can be achieved. In addition, we are including questions for students to consider when engaging in collaborative activities.

Questions for Instructors

1. What is the content of this course? What aspects of the content lend themselves to collaborative group activities?
2. What are the goals of the small-group activities?
3. What size groups or teams should be formed in order to achieve those goals?
4. How should groups or teams be formed? By the instructor? By the students? Dependent on interests? Dependent on strengths?
5. Should the groups be homogeneous or heterogeneous?
6. Will the participants remain in the same groups throughout the course, or will new groups be formed for each activity?
7. How will activities be structured to ensure participation by all members of the group?
8. Should roles be assigned to various group members?
9. What rewards or motivations will be built into the process?
10. How will accountability be built into the process?
11. How will individual and group performance be evaluated? Who will evaluate this performance? The instructor? The participants themselves?
12. Is there an expectation that students will provide feedback to each other on their work? How will this be built into the course?

Questions for Students

1. How well did I participate in my group? Was I a team player?
2. Did I make a significant contribution?
3. Did I share my portion of the workload?
4. How comfortable do I feel with the group process?
5. Did I feel comfortable expressing any problems or concerns openly?
6. Did I provide substantive feedback to other group members?

7. How do I feel about the collaborative work produced by my group?

8. How well did the collaborative process contribute to my learning goal objectives for this course?