

## Learning Online: A Collaborative Approach

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Building and sustaining interactivity are key skills that online instructors need to develop. Although many instructors would like to include collaborative learning activities in their online courses, they are unsure of how to do so. This is particularly true for those working in the hard sciences and mathematical areas. In this paper and in our session, we will provide ideas for including collaborative activity in online courses, regardless of the content area being taught. The issue of working with varying learning styles will also be addressed.

### The Importance of Collaboration in an Online Course

Collaboration has often been defined as the “heart and soul” of an online course and that which distinguishes online teaching from face-to-face teaching. Collaboration online accomplishes the following:

- ❖ **Assists with deeper levels of knowledge generation** – When online classes are developed from a constructivist frame, the central theme is the co-construction of knowledge and meaning. When working in small groups, teams, or even on the discussion board of an online course, the ability to create knowledge and meaning is enhanced.
- ❖ **Promotes initiative, creativity, and critical thinking** – Stephen Brookfield (1987), in his discussion of critical thinking notes, “Critical thinking is complex and frequently perplexing since it requires the suspension of belief and the jettisoning of assumptions previously accepted without question. As people strive for clarity in self-understanding, and as they try to change aspects of their lives, the opportunity to discuss these activities is enormously helpful (p.10).” Thus, the ability to collaborate enables the development of the ability to think critically, a skill that is more difficult to master individually.
- ❖ **Allows students to create a shared goal for learning and forms the foundation of a learning community** – In our previous work, we have noted that a learning community is the vehicle through which learning occurs in the online course (Palloff and Pratt, 1999; Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Beginning an online course with a discussion of learning objectives and working toward a common goal creates not only the foundation of that learning community, but also is the first step toward collaboration. If students are clear from the beginning of the course that “we’re all in this together,” then incorporating collaborative activity into the course happens much more easily.
- ❖ **Addresses all learning styles** – When an online course is developed using *learning cycles*, which are a systematic set of activities that tap into all learning styles, *collaborative projects*, or *complex activities*, which demand that students approach learning through the use of multiple skills, all learning styles are tapped. Consequently, in using collaborative approaches to learning, the instructor can be assured that the various learning preferences in the group will be utilized and that the less preferred styles may be further developed.
- ❖ **Addresses issues of culture** – Collaborative activity enables the capability of students to construct their own knowledge and apply prior experience and their own culturally preferred ways of knowing to the task. Consequently, through collaboration, it is likely that a more culturally sensitive online classroom can be created.

Collaboration, then, assists the instructor and all students in successfully achieving learning objectives more easily. Although collaboration takes more time, the outcome is actually a more efficient and complete learning process.

### Incorporating Collaborative Activity into an Online Course

There are numerous ways in which an instructor can create collaboration online, regardless of the content area being studied. Some suggestions are:

- ❖ Collaborative small group assignments
- ❖ Research assignments which ask 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

Regardless of how collaborative activity is used online, the instructor is responsible for creating the container through which it can happen effectively. Consequently, the instructor needs to set the stage for collaborative activity by:

- ❖ Focusing on the development of a learning community
- ❖ Creating the environment for collaboration by encouraging collaborative activity from the first day of the course
- ❖ Modeling the process of collaboration through interaction with the group
- ❖ Guiding the participants as they engage in collaborative activity, without dominating the process

Additionally, the questions an instructor poses on the discussion board can assist with and promote collaboration. Brookfield and Preskill (1999), note that there are several categories of questions that promote discussion. They state, “An important focus of democratic discussion should be on getting as many people as possible deeply engaged in the conversation. Whatever the teacher says and does should facilitate and promote this level of engagement (p.87).” The following are the types of questions they delineate that can begin and sustain discussion (pp. 87-92):

- ❖ **Questions That Ask for More Evidence** – These questions are asked when participants state an opinion that seems unconnected to what’s already been said or that someone else in the group thinks is erroneous, unsupported, or unjustified. The question should be asked as a simple request for more information, not as a challenge to the speaker’s intelligence.
- ❖ **Questions That Ask for Clarification** – Clarifying questions give speakers the chance to expand on their ideas so that others understand them in the group. They should be an invitation to convey one’s meaning in the most complete sense possible.
- ❖ **Open Questions** – Questions that are open-ended, particularly those beginning with how and why, are more likely to provoke the students’ thinking and problem-solving abilities and make the fullest use of discussion’s potential for expanding intellectual and emotional horizons.
- ❖ **Linking or Extension Questions** – An effective discussion leader tries to create a dialogical community in which new insights emerge from prior contributions of group members. Linking or extension questions actively engage students in building on one another’s responses to questions.
- ❖ **Hypothetical Questions** – Hypothetical questions ask students to consider how changing the circumstances of a case might alter the outcome. They require students to draw on their knowledge and experience to come up with plausible scenarios.
- ❖ **Cause-and-Effect Questions** – Questions that provoke students to explore cause-and-effect linkages are fundamental to developing critical thought.
- ❖ **Summary and Synthesis Questions** – One of the most valuable types of questions that teachers can ask invites students to summarize or synthesize what has been thought and said. These questions call on participants to identify important ideas and think about them in ways that will aid recall.

### **How Comfortable Are You in Working With Collaboration? An Exercise in Letting Go**

Collaborative activity requires that instructors empower students to take charge of the learning process. Consequently, it is important for an instructor, before incorporating collaborative learning into an online course to do a self-assessment to determine just how comfortable he or she is with letting go of the control. Self-assessment questions for reflection include:

- ❖ How do I teach now? What types of learning activities do I include in a face-to-face class?
- ❖ How much do I know about small group dynamics? Do I know enough to be able to intervene in a group if the process is not going well?
- ❖ How will I need to shift or change my teaching style or approach to enable collaboration to happen?

- ❖ How comfortable do I feel letting go of the control and allowing learners to take charge of the process?

The responses to these questions can determine whether collaborative activity will succeed or fail in an online course. The instructor must act as a facilitator or guide, allowing students to create their own learning process. It is the outcome of that process that is most critical – how the students get there should be of minimal interest to the instructor.

### **Evaluating Collaborative Assignments and Collaborative Work**

A major concern expressed by instructors as they embark on collaborative activity online is how to evaluate the outcome of that work. Is giving a group grade fair? If not, how does the individual student earn a grade? We do use group grading for some of our collaborative projects online. However, we do so by asking students to send us a private e-mail giving themselves a grade and evaluating and grading each member of the group. We incorporate this into our assessment of their process and outcome. We will also use this same process in providing individual grades for a group project. Often, giving a group grade for the final product and an individual grade for each group member's work within the activity provides the most equitable means by which collaborative work can be evaluated.

We also feel that it is critical for students to evaluate the process they went through, which can be done publicly on the course site. Finally, regardless of how evaluation occurs, veto power remains with the instructor. If we feel that students are being too harsh in their evaluation of themselves and others, we will intervene. Concern about how to evaluate collaborative activity should not hinder the inclusion of this powerful tool in an online course as it is the most effective means by which to maximize the learning process and create a quality learning outcome for all involved.

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**Rena Palloff, Ph.D.** is a member of the faculty of Capella University in the School of Education working with masters and Ph.D. students, at the Fielding Graduate Institute, teaching in their completely online masters degree program in Organizational Management. **Keith Pratt, Ph.D.** also teaches at Capella and the Fielding Graduate Institute. Rena and Keith have both been appointed to the faculty of The Center for Excellence in Education. In addition, Rena and Keith are the managing partners of Crossroads Consulting Group, working with organizations and institutions in developing and delivering effective online distance learning programs. They are the authors of the Frandson Award winning book *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom (Jossey-Bass, 1999)* and *Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom: The Realities of Online Teaching (Jossey-Bass, 2001)*. They are in the process of completing their third book, *The Virtual Student: A Profile and Guide*, which should be available early in 2003. The books are based on their many years of teaching experience in the online environment and contain vignettes and case examples from a variety of successful online courses. Drs. Palloff and Pratt have been presenting this work across the United States and internationally since 1994.

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