CORE 30
Student Collaboration in Online Classes

Learning Outcomes
- Identify the benefits of providing opportunities for students to participate in collaboration in an online class.
- List different types of effective collaboration activities.
- List the steps for setting up and facilitating collaboration activities.

Identify methods for assessing student work in collaborative activities.
- Identify technology tools that can be used for collaboration in an online class.

Cognitive Benefits of Collaborative Learning Activities
- Development of critical thinking skills
- Co-creation of knowledge and meaning (as opposed to traditional passive acquisition of knowledge
- Transformative learning
- Social learning
- Career-readiness skills, as team-based work skills transfer to authenticity to career fields.

Strategic Benefits of Collaborative Learning Activities
- Students may feel more comfortable getting to know and interacting with a few people rather than the whole class
- Students analyze and synthesize material on a deeper level as they collaborate on a final product.
- Participants gain opportunities for leadership among their peers.
- Small groups can encourage acceptance of diversity and differing opinions.
- Students can practice interpersonal, organization, and conflict management skills.

Types of Collaborative Activities and Examples
- Interpersonal Exchange: Interpersonal communication allows students to engage with material while building social skills.
  - Discussion boards, shared journals, forum debates, and social media events are all examples of interpersonal communication opportunities you can provide your students. Following are a few tips for successful communication activities:
    - Define and model expectations for communication
    - Have a conflict plan in place
    - Take an active role in communication assignments
    - For discussion boards and forums, determine a topic for discussion
    - Reduce online group sizes

- Information Sharing: Information exchange involves students sharing all kinds of data and information.
    - There are unlimited options for collaborative information collection and sharing activities. These can include but go beyond the PowerPoint and Prezi presentation assignment.
        - Design an eLearning Blog in which students explore a topic at length with their peers, post links and resources and make available to a real-world audience.
        - Create online microlearning resources. Groups explore a topic at length, then create short videos including information and/or task-tutorials.
        - Co-host a webinar to present information to the class and to invite real-time feedback and communication.
        - Create a virtual field trip to a local point of interest related to the topic.
- Problem Solving: Team problem solving can help students build communication and collaboration skills.
    - Allows students to collaboration through sharing ideas and diverse strategies for approaching a problem. When students are provided with a complex, real-world problem, they have the opportunity to grow their ability to think critically, creatively and productively.
        - Product development
        - Social action projects
        - Case analysis
        - Visual representation of solutions to a mathematics or scientific problem

Challenges of Group Work in Online Courses:

If you have ever implemented collaborative projects, you know they can be frustrating. Collaborating at a distance adds additional potential frustrations that most commonly include inadequate preparation, communication issues, and dealing with learner dissatisfaction. Student resistance to group online projects may also have to be overcome. Many students come into an online class having had a negative experience with group work.

Solutions: Assessing Collaborative Work

- Make participation mandatory: Set clear expectations for individual contributions. Create virtual group space, such as a Group Discussion forum in Blackboard, or a Google Drive folder and monitor this space.
- Use peer evaluation to encourage equal participation: Peer evaluation creates accountability measures for group work. It can benefit students who make contributions and help address students who do not fully participate.
- Provide students with a rubric for peer evaluation: Create a rubric based on key interpersonal skills you are expecting students to exhibit.
- Give a group grade for the product and a participation grade based on peer review: The assessment of the group's work should be done separately, as it should be utilized as assessment for learning (i.e. assessment that helps students understand how to get better at a task).

Solutions: Setup and Facilitation of Online Groups

- Keep it Simple: Start with a simple project to help students understand how groups function online and help them gain trust in their classmates
- Keep it Clear: Provide specific, clear instructions and monitor progress to determine any confusion or misconceptions.
- Keep it Visible: Don't assume students know how to "do" group work. Provide modeling and scaffolding for the project.
- Keep it on Schedule: Provide students with mini-deadlines and checkpoints.
- Keep it Open: Make sure the lines of communication are open for students to report issues and ask questions.
- Keep it Manageable: Remember that students are participating in groups with varying schedules, so collaborative activities can take longer.

Solutions: Managing Student Groups

- Grouping Students: Blackboard allows instructors to easily create groups who will have access to their own content and discussion boards within your course. Visit the [Blackboard Help pages](#) to learn how!
- Group Size: In an online classroom, group size is important because it provides the instructor some control over the process of facilitating discussions, completing assignments, and promoting collaborative work. Additionally, the type of assignments must be taken into account when creating this kind of structure. Smaller groups are necessary if papers are to be written collaboratively or if online presentations are to be prepared, for example, to be given to the larger group.
- Facilitating Groups: Just as in a face-to-face classroom environment, the online instructor needs to monitor the process and jump in to facilitate when and where it may be needed. Procedures for rotating responsibilities of group members and assigning roles to specific group members should be outlined at the beginning of the group activity so students all have the same clear, concise directions. Instructors still need to monitor groups for participation and may even enter into the discussion when invited, or when the need arises. Issues or differences that occur within the online group should first be worked out among the group members. The online instructor should only intervene in cases where the issues cannot be resolved.
- Troubleshooting: Most of the issues that are unique to small group work relate to participants struggling to connect with absentee group members and group members who don't pull their own weight. As a facilitator, you can help with both of these issues.

    Providing advanced warning for upcoming group work is the first step. Remind members of their responsibility to "Post early and post often" in their small group forum. Let them know that you will be visiting their small group forums, and make a point to pop into each one early in the process and let them know you are there with a brief comment or greeting. When it comes to participants letting the rest of the group do the work, the forum itself and the history feature on a wiki or Google doc allow you to see what types of collaboration have occurred. Self-assessments can provide another view of participation within the group

- There are times when a single participant may be more challenging to work with than others. Changing groups allows you to move that individual from group to group without it being obvious to the class.

References

This course adapted from: Student Collaboration in the Online Classroom
Author: Evan Abbey
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