LEARNING TO TEACH ONLINE

Online teamwork and collaboration

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Aims and overview

While developing effective teamwork and collaboration skills are considered important to the learning process, many students find group work challenging and difficult. In this episode we explore how Internet technologies can improve the collaborative process within online teamwork, and offer some useful strategies for facilitation and assessment.

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Released May 2011

"There is a movement at the moment to think about how Internet technologies can make group work more effective, perhaps less time consuming, any maybe a little more transparent, or fairer to the students that are participating in the group." *(Professor Matthew Allen)*

"Tone of voice, facial expressions, body language are dramatically diminished in the online context… that presents communication challenges." *(Ian McArthur)*

"Showing people the benefits of group work is difficult, but think about what you do in the real life context when you leave the university and you're working in an office… you do that in groups, you do that in teams. Its an authentic approach to learning." *(Associate Professor Anthony Herrington)*

Why should students undertake teamwork and group projects?

Group work is increasingly regarded as an essential skill for graduates, therefore developing effective teamwork and collaboration skills are important to a student's learning process, and reflect the dynamics of the typical work environment that students will eventually enter. Working in teams assists students in developing their problem solving, communication and critical thinking skills, and allows them the opportunity to work with and learn from their peers. Many students, however, find teamwork challenging and difficult. It is important therefore to explain what the benefits of teamwork and collaboration are, what learning outcomes will be achieved through a group assignment, and how these will benefit students both in their studies and subsequent careers. Factors such as those below are all concerns that students can sometimes raise when assigned a group project:

- *Logistics of where and how often to meet up as a group*

- *Difference in expectations*

- *The potential for an uneven distribution of workload*

- *The potential for conflict*

- *Perceived lack of control over the their individual grade.*

Useful strategies for teachers

- **Lead by example:** *For many students, online teamwork is a new experience. As a teacher you should check into the team areas regularly to encourage, guide and nurture your students through the process*

- **Peer Moderation:** *This allows team members to evaluate one another's contribution at the end of the project, which is then reflected in their grade. This process can motivate students to contribute more equitably, as they will be vocal about any students who undertook a disproportionate share of the workload. There are several online self-evaluation tools such as iPeer that can help facilitate this process, however no special tools are necessary*

- **Allocate marks for individual contribution:** *Make students aware that their individual participation and contribution to the team project will be assessable, and will form part of their overall grade. It is important to indicate to your students what constitutes a good contribution (refer to the episode "Engaging and motivating students" for more strategies).*

Online teamwork

How you facilitate good teamwork online is much the same as you would in a face-to-face context: teachers should select an appropriate assessment task which guides and facilitates opportunities for students to engage with both content and their peers. The assessment strategies and learning outcomes should reflect this process of collaboration, communication and problem solving. As with face-to-face teaching, it is critical that the importance and benefits of teamwork be explained to students beforehand. However, working in groups online brings a different set of benefits and considerations for both students and teachers.

Benefits of online teamwork and collaboration

- **Diverse student cohort:** *Online teamwork provides unique opportunities for students to collaborate with others from different cities, countries, cultures, disciplines and institutions*

- **Increased Flexibility:** *Since team discussions and contributions can take place [asynchronously](), students are able to contribute at a time and place that is convenient to them*

- **Transparency and accountability:** *The Internet can make the collaborative process more transparent. Most online collaborative technologies including [Web 2.0]() examples such as [wikis](), [Wiggio](), and [Huddle](), leave records of what individual members have contributed. This makes it is easy for teachers to monitor the team's progress, as well as the quality and frequency of each team member's contribution*

- **Equity and accessibility:** *The online environment provides students living with a disability or accessibility issue, the opportunity to participate more easily and equally. Similarly, students that are more reticent in class, or who are less familiar with the language in which the class is conducted, are able to participate more easily and confidently when they can prepare and or reread contributions before posting them*

- **Peer review, assessment and moderation:** *Online contexts allow team members to easily review, provide feedback, and assess one another's work, and how other team members have performed within the group.*

Considerations

- **Absence of verbal and visual cues:** *Tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language are substantially diminished in the online context, and can easily present communication challenges. It is important that students understand the nuances of communicating effectively through the written word*

- **Technical difficulties:** *Online teamwork can be hindered by complicated and unreliable technology, insufficient bandwidth, and limitations on student access to the Internet. The choice of software and file formats required to complete a team project should be considered when designing an assessment task*

- **Asynchronous and synchronous communication:** *Many students may not have prior experience of online teamwork, and are not aware of the benefits that [synchronous]() and [asynchronous]() discussions can bring to the collaboration process. It is helpful to explain to students how each differs and suggest which learning contexts are better suited to each (eg asynchronous allows more flexibility and a considered response to contributions, whereas synchronous facilitates quicker group decisions at certain milestones)*

- **Agreeing on pattern of interaction:** *It can be difficult and frustrating for a team to track down members that simply do not check in and contribute to the progress of an assignment. It is important therefore that team members agree at the beginning of any collaboration, what they expect of one another. This can be done formally through a 'group learning contract' where the team outlines issues such as how often individual team members are expected to contribute, preferred roles (eg team leader, person who compiles the information, etc), project milestones, a process for conflict resolution, etc*

- **Building trust:** *Students may sometimes find it confronting when asked to collaborate with one another when they might never meet face-to-face. For a group to function well, it needs to bond. By incorporating an 'icebreaker' task at the start of an assignment, team members can be encouraged to build trust by learning about one another's strengths and getting to know the personalities of their peers.*

Conclusion

Teamwork skills are considered increasingly important in the student's learning process. While the principles for facilitation of good teamwork are much the same for online contexts as they are for face-to-face environments, understanding how online communication works, and the benefits that Internet technologies can offer, can create unique opportunities for collaboration, assessment and engagement.

Additional information

IPeer: Open source peer and self-evaluation tool
www.sourceforge.net/projects/ipeer

Asynchronous and synchronous communication
www.asaecenter.org/Resources/articledetail.cfm?ItemNumber=13572

Additional reading*

Hrastinski, S. (2008). Asynchronous and Synchronous E-Learning: A study of asynchronous and synchronous e-learning methods discovered that each supports different purposes. EDUCAUSE Quarterly, 31(4).

McArthur, I., McIntyre, S., Watson, K. (2007). Preparing students for the global workplace: An examination of collaborative online learning approaches. Paper presented at the ConnectEd Conference, International Conference on Design Education, Sydney, Australia.

McIntyre, S. (2008). Leap of Faith: Effective Steps for Establishing Online Collaborative Learning Initiatives. Paper presented at the 3rd International Conference on e-Learning, University of Cape Town, South Africa.

Raban, R., Litchfield, A. (2009). The TeCTra onlnine groupwork tool: Scaffolding the learning of self and peer assessment. Paper presented at ASCILITE Conference 2009, Auckland, New Zealand

Smith, G. G., Sorensen, C., Gump, A., Heindel, A. J., Caris, M., & Martinez, C. D. (2010). Overcoming student resistance to group work: Online versus face-to-face. The Internet and Higher Education, 14(2), 121-128. Elsevier Inc.

Tseng, H. Ku,H,. Wang,C,. Sun, L. (2009). Key Factors in Online collaboration and their relationship to teamwork satisfaction. Quarterly Review of Distance Education. 10(2).

Watson, K., McIntyre, S., McArthur, I. (2009). Trust and relationship building: critical skills for the future of design education in online contexts. Paper presented at the ICOGRADA Education Network Conference, Beijing, China.

*Note: Some readings are held in subscription only databases. In most cases accessing the link from your institution's network will enable access

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To find out more about the Learning to Teach Online project, or to view the video component of this episode, please visit the COFA Online Gateway.

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About the project

The Learning to Teach Online project is a free professional development resource designed to help teachers from any discipline, whether experienced in online teaching or not, to gain a working understanding of successful online teaching pedagogies that they can apply in their own unique teaching situations. It hopes to encourage dialogue, discussion and the sharing of ideas about online learning and teaching across disciplines and between institutions around the world.

About COFA Online

COFA Online is an academic unit at the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South Wales (UNSW), Sydney, Australia. It has been innovating online pedagogy, academic professional development and effective online learning strategies since 2003.

About The University of New South Wales

UNSW has an enrolment of approximately 40,000 students, and is the leading international university in Australia with over 10,000 international enrolments from over 130 nations. UNSW was also ranked as the top university in 2009 in the Australian Government Learning and Teaching Performance Fund for the quality of its teaching.

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