

Perceptions of Online Course Communication and Collaboration

CET 747 Web & ITV Based Applications of Dist Education

Matt Storm & Tammy Block

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Introduction

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines collaboration as "to work jointly with others or together especially in an intellectual endeavor" and communication as "the technology of the transmission of information" (1987). In today's fast paced, technologically advanced world these simple words take on a new meaning. The introduction of online communication and collaboration technology tools into the field of education has transformed instructors, learners and classrooms. The ability to collaborate with peers and communicate with strangers is important in order to be successful in today's educational arena and workforce. To gain a better grasp of this topic, it is imperative to understand what applications makeup online communication and which mediums allow online collaboration to be possible. One also must understand the role of the instructor and student, the methods to increase communication and collaboration in the online environment, and what advantages students gain from these online tools.

What Is Online Communication

An individual can develop a perception of online communication through teaching via distance learning, as an e-mentor for high school students, and as a distance learning student. Online communication is a unique method used for organizing information and bringing students, teachers, and resources together efficiently and timely to undertake a project or create resource contacts. Over the last ten years, online communication has evolved drastically from a state-of-the-art fax machine to an Internet course management system utilizing a discussion board. Online communication consists of two different forms, synchronous and asynchronous (Horton, 2000).

Utilizing the most effective form of communication is a critical decision when creating online courses. Synchronous communication, according to Horton, allows everyone involved in a project or discussion to perform their part at the same time (2000). Students and teachers utilize this type of communication through videoconferences, chat sessions, and instant messages. These communication mediums allow users to experience lively, spontaneous exchanges that provide instant feedback and reduce ambiguity (Havard, Du, Xu, 2008).

Asynchronous communication, on the other hand, is an activity or discussion that students and teachers can experience or take part in whenever it is convenient for them (Horton, 2000). This particular form of communication includes email, discussion boards, and online tests. None of these technology tools require students or teachers to be online at the exact same time.

According to Havard et.al., asynchronous communication users experience “with regard to media richness,...multiple cues, natural language...and mutual understanding...” (2008). An online learning environment contains a variety of communication medias for students and teachers to utilize. Students are encouraged and “expected to use the media to communicate with their classmates and group members...to enable successful project completion” (Havard, et.al., 2008). Online communication is all about creating connections with other students and teachers and organizing information in unimaginable ways.

What is Online Collaboration

When some students are told that they will be working collaboratively; the reaction is definitely mixed. Some students enjoy working in pairs or groups, while others just want the assignment so they can get to work. Collaborative learning is not a new idea or learning method, but rather something that has been around for thousands of years (Thompson & Ku, 2006). It is no longer necessary to be in the same room to collaborate on a project due to the various online

media applications. Some of the free online tools include collaborative writing and editing, file sharing, remote desktop sharing, and online videoconferencing.

Thompson & Ku (2006) share with us that, “Online collaboration is the computer-mediated version of the traditional in-class collaborative learning.” Students, who are shy and uncomfortable actively participating in traditional classroom collaboration, thrive with online projects because there are no time restrictions, competition, or interruptions (Havard, et.al., 2008). Online collaboration provides students and teachers with flexibility; not everything has to be done on a certain day at a certain time. Flexibility has the amazing ability to increase student participation. According to Thompson & Ku (2006), in their online collaborative learning study, “participation is the most basic requirement of a collaborative group because it is impossible to collaborate without individual contributions to problem solving.” Collaboration is crucial to learning online.

Instructor’s Role in Online Communication and Collaboration

Online communication tools and collaborative projects are key components to successful web-based learning. However, even before student communication and collaboration can take place, a successful online classroom environment must be created, managed, maintained, and evaluated by the instructor (Bradley, 2010). Havard et.al. (2008) also believes that instructor involvement and appropriate online class design are imperative for student success. In the online learning environment, the role of the instructor has evolved to that of a facilitator; one who guides the learning process. Bradley (2010) discovered through his research that instructors facilitate online learning by reminding students of impending deadlines, exchanging regular e-contact with groups and individuals, keeping discussions on track, and providing online structure

to ensure adequate productivity. This type of classroom leadership allows students the freedom and confidence to actively discuss classroom topics, distribute additional resources they have discovered, share relevant first hand experiences with classmates, and gain pertinent collaborative group experience. By discretely performing these tasks, the facilitator gently guides his/her students to develop their own collective knowledge without explicitly doing so (Bradley, 2010).

Student's Role in Online Communication and Collaboration

Students who enroll and participate in online courses often do so because of the convenience of not having to travel, the flexibility in completing assignments, and the ability to maintain family obligations. However, some unintended outcomes from these advantages may cause stress for students as they advance through an educational program. Every student possesses a unique learning style, a unique method for retaining information, and personal timetable for completing tasks; which are not easily acknowledged in the online classroom. In an online collaborative learning environment, students eventually realize that the “understanding of learning is a process, not a product” (Gabriel, 2004). In order for online students to successfully collaborate on projects and assignments, they need to be able to trust, respect, and communicate, with other members in their group.

“Trust emerged as an important component of successful online collaboration. This appeared to be an issue where group members had never met one another” (Havard, et.al., 2008). Each student is responsible for contributing to the group project and when that is not accomplished, other group members have to pick up the slack and complete additional work. Online students, who seldom meet face-to-face, can experience frustration with members of their

group when they procrastinate. Some students enjoy working under pressure and completing projects at the last minute, while other students need to complete the work ahead of time in order to alleviate unnecessary stress (Thompson & Ku, 2006). Solving conflicts between group members is never any easy task; however, respect is essential to maintaining group harmony.

With every collaborative group project assigned there always seems to be interruptions and unforeseen circumstances that delay the pending project or assignment. Martha Gabriel (2004) discovered that online students need to be respectful of other group member's family and work commitments to ensure successful project completion. Since the majority of online students are adults, they need to be treated as such. When students are able to return to the group, they are still expected to complete their share of the work. There are some instances, however, where students believe they can get by without doing their portion of the group project; this behavior is referred to as social loafing phenomenon (Thompson & Ku, 2006). Otherwise known as sandbaggers to the other group members! To alleviate this problem, students should practice consistent group communication.

According to Thompson & Ku (2006) another challenging area for online student collaboration is ineffective communication. Online students often find time and distance constraints difficult during a class collaboration project, which makes face-to-face meetings impossible. Gabriel (2004) recommends that online students take the commitment of group participation and communication, during a collaborative project, very seriously. Some collaborative groups experience frustration with members who do not communicate via any medium for many days. This causes group members to experience an overwhelming feeling of helplessness and isolation. Another communication breakdown occurs when one member of the group offers to complete a certain part and then does not follow through thus leaving the

remaining members scrambling to finish the project by the given due date. The cornerstone of any successful group and collaborative project is communication! Bradley (2010) concludes that the presence of communication tools in online classes does not assure collaboration of new knowledge.

How to Increase Online Communication and Collaboration

- *use of the tools?
- *list the tools?
- *examples of tools?

Benefits of Online Communication and Collaboration

Online communication and collaboration is like an art form that students and teachers have to work to perfect each semester. There are numerous benefits to learning online. Some students report that they learned the information more quickly, gained confidence in asking thought provoking questions, shared newly discovered resources, and discovered after time, working in groups became easier (Gabriel, 2004).

Students who believe that the online learning environment allows them to learn at a faster pace are students who desire to take charge of their own learning. When these students are part of a collaborative group, they often delegate jobs to other group members and enjoy learning from their peers. Online collaborative learning opportunities provide students with the opportunity to increase their question asking ability. Students who are apprehensive and shy in

the traditional classroom may blossom in the online classroom because of the lack of intimidation caused by certain classmates. As students gain experience in the online environment they discover, through research and practice, beneficial web-based resources. The knowledge gained from their research allows the student to share their expertise in certain situations. After completing a few courses and a variety of collaborative group projects, students often felt relaxed about working in groups and looked forward to the unique interaction. Shipley, Johnson, & Hashemi (2009) stress that “collaborative learning involves different people with different perspectives working together to solve a problem.”

Conclusion

Communication and collaboration are important in the traditional classroom; however it takes on a whole new meaning in the online learning environments. When instructors integrate online communication tools students become engaged and excited about the upcoming learning venture.

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