

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESSFUL GROUP WORK

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ABSTRACT

The thought of group work, or CLC Groups often strikes fear and loathing in the hearts and minds of both students and instructors. According to Swan, Shen, and Hiltz (2006) collaborative work presents the possibilities of many difficulties including a largely unequal contribution of group participants, an inability of the students to manage the different ideas and opinions while progressing, a decentralization of the objective of the work due to the requirement for increased autonomy and control over the choice of information and its processing, and individual assessment of each group participant. However, the many proven benefits of collaborative work make it worthwhile in both traditional and online classrooms. It is well worth the effort to gain control of this aspect of the class and position students for a successful and fulfilling experience. This article will discuss key steps, including connecting to collaborate, committing to comply, and anticipating to adapt, that instructors and students can take to help ensure the best chance for successful group work in the classroom.

Keywords: Collaborating, Collaborative, Facilitating, Synchronous, Asynchronous

INTRODUCTION

Success in group work is largely dependent on providing opportunities for connecting and forming a community in which the shared task is clear, and roles, rules, and responsibilities are understood and complied with. Haythornthwaite (2000) noted several characteristics that indicate the presence of community, including “recognition of members and nonmembers, a shared history, a common meeting place, commitment to a common purpose, adoption of normative standards of behavior, and emergence of hierarchy and roles.” Based on these findings, Haythornthwaite (2000) made three specific recommendations for supporting virtual learning communities: “promote initial bonding, monitor and support continued interaction and participation, and provide multiple means of communication for sustaining group interactions.” In this article, we will demonstrate how instructors can facilitate the support of collaborative groups in the online classroom.

CONNECT TO COLLABORATE: PROVIDE

OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONNECTIONS

Making connections in a traditional or in-person class may be more organic than connecting in an online class, but it is not impossible to form these same connections virtually. Once these connections are made, a community forms in which students can collaborate on group projects successfully. Gigliotti (2016) cited the definition of community as “a group of people who are willing to help each other. In this sense, community is more than a way a group of people defines itself: it is a capability that can be developed and improved over time.” If a community can be forged early in an online class and fostered and encouraged throughout the class, it improves the chances for a successful collaborative experience.

There are many opportunities in the virtual classroom for students to connect early and often. The need for early and ongoing communication among classmates is stressed by Haythornthwaite (2001) who argued that informal communication “is particularly important for creating bonds of community and group identity.” Haythornthwaite’s

latent-tie theory suggests that network-based communication systems, including the virtual chatroom, “lay the groundwork for connectivity between formerly unconnected others.” The first opportunity in an online class may be introductions in a virtual space where students may post their own bios and introduce themselves to the class. Features like a Class Wall or other shared spaces should be classroom components. This area is an opportunity for students to make an initial and critical connection to their classmates in the first week of class. This space offers a safe, ungraded space for students to get to know each other on a personal basis before beginning classwork.

Discussion forums are an integral feature of the online classroom as they effectively replace the in-person discussion that would normally take place in a traditional classroom. Requiring student to student communication in these ongoing discussions may help students exercise and practice effective communication with their classmates, so they may be more successful in a group setting while collaborating on a project.

Instructor-created and monitored prayer forums, student chat forums, and virtual cafes are additional features of many online classrooms that help students forge personal connections and become comfortable with interaction before and during their group work assignments.

COMMIT TO COMPLY: DISCUSSION OF GROUND RULES

Lack of assignment clarity, transparency, and commitment from individual students are a few of the top reasons for difficulty in collaborative group work, per Swan, Shen, and Hiltz (2006). Specifically, students and instructors most often complain of a largely unequal contribution of group participants, the inability of the students to manage and channel the different ideas and opinions while progressing towards a cohesive group project, a decentralization of the original objective due to the requirement for increased autonomy over the choice of information and its processing, and the varying methods of individual assessment of each group participant (Swan, Shen & Hiltz, 2006). Many of these issues may be avoided or minimized by best practices that will set up students for a successful group work experience.

Instructors can head off questions and confusion by posting collaborative group rosters in advance

of the assignment, along with detailed instructions concerning any collaborative assignments in class. Transparency and communication are critical to ensuring a successful experience. Some schools may have a prewritten contract or agreement that lays out the roles and responsibilities of each student in the group. Requiring students to sign an agreement within their collaborative group is a great way to ensure early in the process that each student understands his or her responsibilities prior to beginning work on a group project.

Students can identify with their group early on by selecting a leader or working together to rename their group. Establishing the role of the group leader as one who communicates the group name or directs questions to the instructor is an ideal way to have students go through the process of working together towards a common goal. When these non-graded activities take place prior to the actual group assignment, students get used to the process before grades are at stake.

ANTICIPATE AND ADAPT: THE INSTRUCTOR ROLE

Instructors can take additional steps towards helping students to enjoy a successful group work experience. By addressing the “when” “where” and “how” questions about the collaborative assignment process, instructors can take much of the guesswork out of the experience for students. The class discussion forums may be used to address the assignment and any related questions students have prior to the due date of the group assignment. Discussion forums provide a non-threatening opportunity for students to ask questions about group work and the assignment at hand. Even those students who do not have a direct question about the assignment will benefit from the discussion taking place in the forums.

Instructors may take the extra step of grouping students according to time zone to allow for greater ease in setting up synchronous meeting times. Even in asynchronous classrooms, students may try to organize specific meeting times to discuss the finer details of the project, and organizing students in this manner may help that process. Instructors can also review options for synchronous collaboration, such as Google Docs and Skype. However, the most ideal collaboration occurs in the online classroom where participation can be monitored and graded.

Instructors can also adapt the group work

according to class participation. Ideally, group assignments should occur a few weeks into the course, which allows students opportunities to get to know other classmates. In addition, instructors can gauge student participation levels and can set up groups accordingly. For example, an instructor may choose to place low-participating students in one group. If students from this particular group end up checking in and showing interest, they can be moved to active participating groups, while those students reluctant to participate will not impede the progress of the more active students.

CONCLUSION

The importance of social interaction in the classroom cannot be overstated. Evident in the seedlings of Vygotsky's social development theory, we know that "all higher order functions originate as the relationships among individuals" (Vygotsky 1978, as cited in Gigliotti, 2016). The online classroom is ripe ground for student-to-student interaction, and that interaction becomes a critical component of a successful collaborative work experience within the online classroom. By not only facilitating this social interaction among students, but also by communicating early and clearly the ground rules of collaborative participation, the instructor can turn the often-dreaded online group work experience into a satisfying and memorable experience for all students.

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