

Learning Together in Community: Collaboration Online

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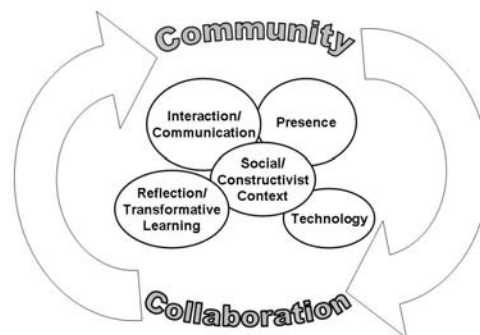
Why Collaborate Online?

The online environment can be a lonely place. Students and faculty alike report feelings of isolation when working online. The benefits of taking or teaching an online class – being able to connect any time and any place, from one’s bedroom in pajamas and bunny slippers or from a library or computer lab – also can be a detriment of sorts given that, for the most part, the people with whom one is interacting are represented by words on a screen.

Recent studies of the online learning environment have noted that involvement or “social presence,” better known as a feeling of community and connection among learners, has contributed positively to learning outcomes and learner satisfaction with online courses (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997; Kazmer, 2000; Murphy, Drabier, and Epps, 1998; Picciano, 2002; Tu and Corry, 2002). Beyond learner satisfaction, however, is the more important belief that collaboration enhances learning outcomes and reduces the potential for learner isolation that can occur in the online environment. By learning together in a learning community, students have the opportunity to extend and deepen their learning experience, test out new ideas by sharing them with a supportive group, and receive critical and constructive feedback. The likelihood of successful achievement of learning objectives and achieving course competencies increases through collaborative engagement.

The following figure illustrates the ways in which the elements of collaboration and community interact with one another to create a successful learning experience online:

Figure .: Model of Online Collaboration



Our advancing study of online community informs us that community is made up of more than what we originally thought. The elements of community, as we previously identified them (Palloff and Pratt, 1999 and 2003) included:

- *People* – the students, faculty, and staff involved in an online course
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- *Shared Purpose* – coming together to take an online course, including the sharing of information, interests, and resources
- *Guidelines* – create the structure for the online course, by providing the ground rules for interaction and participation
- *Technology* – serves as a vehicle for delivery of the course and a place where everyone involved can meet
- *Collaborative learning* – promotes student-to-student interaction as the primary mode of learning and also supports socially constructed meaning and knowledge creation
- *Reflective practice* – promotes transformative learning

We now note that social presence is a critical element of the online community and one that is also critical to collaborative work.

Effective Use of Collaboration Online

Regardless of how collaborative activity is used online, the instructor is responsible for creating the container through which it can happen effectively. All too often, when collaborative activity is included in an online course, the approach is simply to write the activity into the syllabus, form dyads or teams, and assume that the students will be able to take it from there. Instead, ongoing instructor involvement is needed to ensure successful outcome.

Collaborative activity in an online course goes through several phases. The following is a discussion of those phases along with suggestions for instructor involvement in each:

Set the Stage – Setting the stage involves a number of activities including providing an explanation of the importance of the collaborative work as well as clear guidelines for completing it. The results of case study research conducted by Ge, Yamashiro, and Lee (2000) noted that student preparation prior to the engagement in collaborative activity significantly increases the cognitive achievement of participants. Preparation includes presenting an agenda and instructions for the activity as well as ensuring that students are comfortable with the technology in use. If students are clear about the nature of the activity and how they are to complete it, they are much more likely to pick up the gauntlet and move forward with minimal instructor intervention.

1. ***Create the Environment*** – In order for collaborative activity to happen well, students need to have a place to meet and know the parameters of how they should connect. In other words, does all activity have to occur on the discussion board? If so, will there be a space created for each group to meet privately? Are phone calls and synchronous chat sessions permissible means for working together? Are face-to-face meetings allowed? Will the instructor be a part of the small group somehow, either through observation or direct participation in activities such as synchronous chats? All of these questions need to be addressed in preparing students for an activity to assist them in knowing where to go to complete their work and what the “rules of engagement” might be.
2. ***Model the Process*** – The instructor cannot simply set up a collaborative activity and walk away from it, leaving the learners to fend for themselves. Brookfield (1995) notes, “Students will be highly skeptical of group discussion if the teacher has not earned the right to ask students to work this way by first modeling her own commitment to the process” (p.5). We believe that this is true for any form of collaborative activity. By modeling collaborative behavior in the course and by allowing students to negotiate some of the parameters within which they will work with one another and with the instructor, the instructor provides a model of what good collaboration looks like.

3. **Guide the Process** – Modeling the process is a first step, but the instructor’s responsibility does not end there. The instructor also has a responsibility to guide the process once it begins. Brookfield (1995) comments on this notion when he says, “A teacher cannot be a fly on the wall if that means being an unobtrusive observer. If you say nothing, this will be interpreted either as withholding of approval or as tacit agreement. Students will always be wondering what your opinion is about what they’re doing. Better to give some brief indication of what’s on your mind than to have students obsessed with whether your silence means disappointment or satisfaction with their efforts” (p.11). When it comes to collaborative activity, letting students know in advance how the instructor intends to be involved with the process and how he or she plans to guide it gives them the sense of confidence they need to move forward.
4. **Evaluate the Process** – It is important to include some form of evaluation at the close of any collaborative event or activity in an online class. This allows the instructor to gain insight into whether the learning objectives of the specific activity were met as well as allowing students the opportunity to debrief the experience.

Challenges to Successful Collaboration

Given that instructors and their students are human, there are always factors that can get in the way of successful outcomes. Some are elements that are beyond the control of the instructor, such as technical difficulties or institutional mandates. But others, such as dyads or teams that are not interacting well with one another, are elements the instructor does have some power to deal with. Good planning and preparation for collaborative work as well as continued involvement throughout the phases of engagement can head off or resolve many of the woes that may befall a collaborative activity before they even occur. Regardless of the activity, if designed with the phases of engagement in mind, the likelihood that students will successfully complete the activity and experience minimal frustration increases. Collaborative activity does not give the instructor a “break” in their teaching schedule online. Instead, it provides a different and interesting way for students to engage with material and one another.

Final Thoughts

The ways in which collaboration can be used online are limitless – An instructor might create a game or use one that is available on the Internet; the instructor might choose to include such things as case studies and simulations along with web quests and other small group projects. Anything that might serve the learning objectives of a particular course will work – creativity and imagination are the keys. We should never be afraid to try new and innovative ways of creating collaboration. Even if we fail, we learn from that failure and that learning informs and enhances our teaching the next time around.

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Biographical Sketches

Rena Palloff, Ph.D., and **Keith Pratt, Ph.D.**, are adjunct faculty at the Fielding Graduate Institute in Educational Leadership and Change and in Organizational Management/Organization Development, and the managing partners of Crossroads Consulting Group. They are also adjunct faculty at Capella University in the School of Education and the School of Human Services. They are the authors of the 1999 Frandson Award winning book *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom* (Jossey-Bass, 1999), **Lessons from the Cyberspace Classroom** (Jossey-Bass, 2001), and their latest book, **The Virtual Student**, which was released by Jossey-Bass in March 2003. Written for faculty, trainers, faculty developers, and administrators of distance learning programs, the books are comprehensive guides to the development of an online environment that helps promote successful learning outcomes while building and fostering a sense of community among the learners. The book is based on their many years of teaching experience in the online environment and contains 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 at conferences including the Distance Teaching and Learning Conference in Madison, WI, EDUCAUSE, and the League for Innovation, as well as consulting to academic institutions and business organizations regarding the development of effective distance learning programs.

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