Chapter 15

Online Learning: Guidelines for Team Effectiveness

Mette L. Baran
Cardinal Stritch University, USA

Janice E. Jones
Cardinal Stritch University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter answers the following question posed by the book editors: “What are some guidelines for working effectively in virtual teams?” To further advance existing literature, the authors utilize a qualitative phenomenological approach with a randomly sampled group of seven students who have completed Master’s level Education courses that were conducted in an online format at a private Midwestern university. Students were half way through their course completion at the time of data collection. In addition, a random sample of one program administrator and four faculty members are interviewed. Specifically, students who enrolled in online Master’s in Education courses are required to work in study teams to complete a certain portion of the course work. Study teams can often be difficult to navigate in person and with the added dimension that a virtual experience brings to developing trusting, successful working relationships, different working guidelines are needed. Findings reveal that managerial and social aspects of online learning and teaching are critical for online students’ success.

INTRODUCTION

The single most important factor, the substrate, which will determine the success (or failure), of any organization in the 21st Century: TRUST. - Warren Bennis

The new normal in business and education today is using technology to aid colleagues and students communicating and working together collabora-
tive in virtual teams to complete tasks. Over 80% of all businesses today utilize virtual collaboration as they compete in a fast paced global market place. Virtual meeting and team collaboration thus becomes more evident and imperative.

More than half of all higher education organizations offer online courses (Hoffman, 2006). This requires higher education institutions to become mindful of designing online degree programs that aid the communication and collaboration between students.

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students and assist in the virtual maneuver of the online learning experience as online learning allows for rich student interactions. However, higher educational institutions need to teach students how to learn online (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Furthermore, course designers need to pay attention to the importance of social constructivism in online learning. Learning is a social activity. Meaning is constructed through interaction and communications with others so collaboration is needed to build knowledge in online learning communities. Students, faculty, and program administrators are grappling with learning teams in the online environment. As online course developers try to replicate the best practices of traditional classrooms, the asynchronous technology of the Internet has added great capability while also increasing the confusion that distance in space and time can add to the learning process.

This chapter will address what is needed to create successful virtual teams. More importantly, this chapter will address this from the unique vantage points of the three constituents, that of: the student, administration, and faculty. Utilizing a qualitative research approach allows the voice of the participant to be heard; sharing stories of successes and struggles through in-depth interviews. Addressing this issue from the three stakeholders added a richness and depth to the chapter and the resulting literature base.

BACKGROUND

Overview of Program

The educational program where the study was conducted is a Master’s in Education Program (MEL). Students are appointed to teams based on various assignments. Each student will be assigned to a minimum of two teams per course and this is interchangeable from course to course. Students have no control over who their team members will be and each assignment only lasts for a maximum of two weeks. This means that students need to be able to connect quickly and learn to collaborate and communicate in an efficient way in order to complete small group assignments. These typically consist of an assignment that requires a shared response for assessment by the instructor. Typically these are case studies that require a common analysis and shared oral and/or written response. Teams of students work together and complete these projects using typical course management tools such as an electronic discussion forum and email messages or telephone conferencing. The learning environment is strictly online. Students use printed text books and each course has its own website. There is a full-time administrator of the online program as well as a web page coordinator. Instructors are either part-or full time, many teach the courses that they designed.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Learning Communities in Higher Education

The emergence of learning communities is an interesting and recent pedagogical development in higher education. The researchers define learning communities as, “Professional educators working collectively and purposefully to create and sustain a culture of learning for all students and adults” (Hipp & Huffman, 2010, p. 12). Additionally, various strategies have been developed to foster learning communities in an online setting. The objectives of these strategies include communicating effectively, strengthening social ties, collaborating in small teams, establishing social networks, and collaborating in knowledge construction (Chang, Chen & Li, 2006; Jones & Issroff, 2005; Wang & Poole, 2004; Yang, Wang, Shen & Han, 2007). However, online behaviors and roles that are fundamental to the functioning of online learning communities, however, have seldom been compared (Yang et al., 2007).
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