Chapter 19
Creating a Collaborative Community in Online Environments

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ABSTRACT
This chapter examines the complexities of creating a collaborative community in online classes. A fully online Master’s of Education program is studied, with students being surveyed regarding their experiences with collaboration in the online courses. Results of the study are discussed, along with recommendations for establishing a sense of community in the online environment. Recommendations include structuring introductory activities for the instructor and students, providing opportunities for authentic collaboration and communication through tools such as blogs and wikis, and guidelines for establishing effective group projects in an online class. Suggestions for future research are also included. Overall, a case is made for the importance of creating meaningful collaborative experiences for students within the context of class content in online courses.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores issues related to communication and collaboration in online environments. Master’s of Education students’ experiences in online courses were studied and used as a base for recommendations on how to establish and promote effective communication in a virtual environment. Additionally, the chapter will address how course activities can promote communication and collaboration for students and faculty.

BACKGROUND

Throughout recent history, the education system in the United States has been playing catch up in terms of its use of technology. As students are becoming more technologically savvy, the need for instructors to increase their use of technology is becoming more and more apparent. Today’s students expect and demand more than an instructor lecturing for hours or copying notes off of a whiteboard for the entire class session. Technology can provide alternatives to these traditional ways of teaching, such as online classes. However, if not developed correctly, online classes can turn into an electronic version of the traditional lecture routine. When designing online classes, it is imperative that instructors consider the communication, interaction, and collaboration among students in an effort to provide a supportive and engaging learning environment. Establishing this type of collaborative community is challenging in a traditional, face-to-face classroom and is even more so when students are not in the same physical space.

LEARNING AS A SOCIAL ACTIVITY

Many prominent educational theorists have recognized the importance of the social aspect of learning. Dewey (1916) discussed the importance of using conversation, interaction with others, and opportunities to apply new knowledge as keys to the learning process. Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development also recognizes the importance of interaction with others who are more knowledgeable and can facilitate learning. Kagan’s work (2001) in the arena of cooperative learning has demonstrated the mutual gains students receive when they work together to complete a task. However, before groups can be successful, class building and team building have to take place to develop the bonds and support that need to be present. The research on the benefits of cooperative learning has shown strong empirical support for this type of instruction (Ellis & Fouts, 1993; Marzano, Pickering, & Pollock, 2001). The challenge in an online environment is how to translate what has been effective in face-to-face teaching into plausible and beneficial online techniques.

ESTABLISHING COLLABORATION IN THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Research indicates that online learning environments can result in effective student learning, maintenance of active student participation, and improved social relationships among participants (Jonassen & Kwon, 2001). In their research on how online learning environments facilitated collaborative learning, Han and Hill (2007) identified three categories with multiple themes as important for facilitating collaborative learning: context, community, and cognition. Context was identified by two themes: structural support and active participation. Using groups along with multiple types of communication were the indicators that identified context. Themes of membership and social dialogues identified community. Indicators that support this include group cohesiveness, member specific jargon, willingness to engage in discussion, and developing a social presence. Cognition was identified as the social process of learning and communal facilitation. Sharing perspectives, goal