Chapter 17

Online Group Work Is Possible, Just Not Easy

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ABSTRACT

While many authors specializing in online education stress the use of group work as an essential tool for the online instructor, students almost unanimously complain. As students resist it, they often have good reasons. While it can be a means to insure good learning outcomes, online group work should not be universally recommended. For the instructor using it effectively is not easy. However, with a good design and effective facilitation, it can be successful. To use it successfully, it must be necessary for the content of the class, provide work areas for the groups, and be monitored by the instructor. Well designed and facilitated group work may help to reduce student aversion to this essential learning tool.

INTRODUCTION

While many authors specializing in online education stress the use of group work as an essential tool for the online instructor, students almost unanimously complain. As students resist it, they often have good reasons. While it can be a means to insure good learning outcomes, online group work should not be universally recommended. For the instructor using it effectively is not easy. However, with a good design and effective facilitation, it can be successful. To use it successfully, it must be necessary for the content of the class, provide work areas for the groups, and be monitored by the instructor. Well designed and facilitated group work may help to reduce student aversion to this essential learning tool.

Anecdotal evidence, empirical research, and meta studies all show that online group work can lead to successful learning outcomes (Johnson, Johnson, & Stanne, 2000; Joo, 2017). I will present research from many sources as well as give you some best practice suggestions to assist you in both the design and facilitation of classes using group work.

In the early days of online learning, many authors expressed concern about the need for community built on group work or collaborative learning in the online class (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai et al., 2008;
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Snyder, 2009). However, an early empirical research study of over one-thousand subjects found that the students were not interested in the community as much as they were in the interaction with the instructor and the content (Shea, 2006). Community came last in the list of interactions. Additionally, many of these authors also pointed out the high attrition rate among early online students and attributed this to a lack of community (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rovai, 2002; Rovai et al., 2008; Snyder, 2009). The rationale being that if the students were able to form a community, they would be able to identify with the other students in the class and thus have better learning outcomes. Two situations, attrition and isolation, while common in the early days of online education, are rarely issues in the current twenty-first century teaching environment. Students today often report having close friends online they have never physically met as well as treating online classes much the same way they do face-to-face.

Literature Review

The constructivist theory of teaching and learning underlies the insistence on the recommendation for group work in online classes. In an early analysis of the application of this theory to online learning, Doolittle (1999) defined constructivism and traced its roots back to such philosophers as Kant, Hegel, and Dewey (para. 1). Constructivism is defined with four basic epistemological tenets: (a) the gaining of knowledge results from active thinking by the individual; (b) thinking allows the individual to adapt successfully to a particular environment; (c) thinking about one’s experiences is a process of organizing and rationalizing but “is not a process to render an accurate representation of reality” (para. 4); (d) “knowing has roots in both biological/neurological construction, and social, cultural, and language-based interactions” (para. 5). Doolittle further explains that there are three categories of constructivism, cognitive, social, and radical (“Types of Constructivism,” para. 1). Cognitive constructivism maintains that reality is knowable and by learning, the individual internalizes the reality around him or herself. Because cognitive constructivism does not hold all knowledge to be subjective, proponents of the other categories consider it a lesser form (“Types of Constructivism,” para. 4). To apply cognitive constructivism to pedagogy, particularly online teaching, Doolittle first warns that constructivism is a theory of gaining knowledge not a teaching theory and, as such, has a tentative connection (“Constructivism Online,” para. 1). He states four assumptions about gaining knowledge in an online environment: (a) learning involves thinking; (b) “learning is adaptive” (“Constructivism Online,” para. 3); (c) “learning is subjective, not objective” (“Constructivism Online,” para. 4); (d) gaining knowledge is both a group and a personal process (“Constructivism Online,” para. 5). Doolittle (1999) then presents eight recommendations for teaching that stress authentic content relevant to the students as well as authentic assessment. He further is unequivocal that the teacher is not an instructor but a guide and facilitator but does add that it is the duty of the teacher to provide “multiple perspectives and representation of content” (“Constructivism Online,” para. 14). He advocates for virtual reality environments, flexible content but posits that many of these constructivist elements cannot be met well in an asynchronous online environment. In his estimation, the potential for strong cognitive constructivist pedagogy online is excellent. His analysis gives a framework within which to understand those authors who mandate group work and online learning communities.

Palloff and Pratt (2007) advocate constructivist teaching theory in their books. They frequently cite the need for allowing students to create new knowledge in online classes with the instructor as a facilitator who is ready to change the content of the class should the students’ construction of new knowledge warrant (Palloff & Pratt, 2001, p. 115). They advocate that all online classes must develop a learning
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