Chapter IX

Collaborative or Cooperative Learning?

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ABSTRACT

With many educational institutions now making use of the Internet for the delivery of courses, many educators are showing interest in non-standard methodologies for teaching and learning — methodologies such as the use of online group collaborative or cooperative work. It is clearly beneficial for educators keen to introduce group learning into a tertiary environment to first familiarize themselves with the existing literature. However, much of the literature conflates the two terms, hence implementation methods and research results are hard to assess. This chapter attempts to clearly distinguish the two terms “collaborative” and “cooperative” so that they can be used appropriately and unambiguously, briefly describes the advantages and shortcomings of each, and concludes with some remarks as to the application of such methods in an online environment.
INTRODUCTION

The increasingly rapid movement of undergraduate and postgraduate courses to online Web-based forms of delivery would seem to provide the ideal circumstances for non-traditional methods of teaching and learning to be re-examined.

Online collaborative or cooperative learning is not widely practiced in undergraduate tertiary education, despite many widely recognized advantages (see, for example, Panitz, 2000). An examination of the literature in this area suggests that researchers and practitioners writing about online collaborative learning are often writing about online cooperative learning, and vice versa. This conflation of terms has resulted in implementation methods and research results being hard to assess. It, therefore, seems important to attempt to ascertain the important similarities and differences between the two, so that theoretical and empirical research on these group learning methodologies in an online environment may be properly carried out and assessed.

TRADITIONAL LEARNING

Traditional learning (see Figure 1) comes in a variety of forms and, therefore, cannot be easily characterized. However, common to most forms of traditional learning is the idea of the sage on the stage, with information provided by the instructor during lectures and the provision of printed course materials. The modes of learner interaction are, therefore, primarily learner-instructor and learner-content, with almost no learning taking place between the students, at least as part of the formal learning process.

Figure 1: Traditional Classroom Learning

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