Chapter XII

Do Online Collaborative Groups Need Leaders?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the value and strategies of online group leadership through a review of published research literature. We examine the philosophies that underpin online groupwork, the tasks that learners engage in and the skills of online instructors and students. Concepts of self-direction and depth of learning are central to the discussion. Leadership styles, social roles, relationships and norms, and the effects of tools and media are all considered, in the context of a range of factors that impact on group dynamics. The chapter concludes with a summary of findings concerning the leadership value of online instructors and students, which is intended to further the understanding and professional development of all online educators.
INTRODUCTION

In her influential book, Laurillard (2002) analyzes what students need from learning technologies. There must be “a continuing iterative dialogue between teacher and student, which reveals the participants’ conceptions, and the variations between them” (Laurillard, 2002, p. 71), and these in turn will determine the focus for further dialogue. This essential dialogue or conversation can be conducted in the online medium. In a sense, we might say that a learner collaborates with a teacher. However, it is more usual for collaborative learning to be understood as referring to a group of learners. A teacher may act as the guide or leader, or as a member of the group and a co-learner.

Online collaboration emphasizes student activity and signals changes in perceptions of who is responsible for leading groups of learners. It raises questions about the roles of teachers and students as leaders. This chapter aims to examine the proposition that the success or failure of online collaboration depends on the role and skills of a teacher or group leader. The backdrop for this proposition is the enterprise of designing collaborative learning with appropriate learner support.

There is reason to believe that online groups do need guidance. The key question seems to be the extent to which teachers make students conscious of their roles, and the degree to which the instructors are tangibly present in an online environment. There is also some evidence that learners may prefer to collaborate without input from a teacher, but questions of who leads the group, and how, remain important. A related issue is the skill set of the leader, variously known as the online moderator, facilitator, coordinator and so on, depending on his or her role. Field (2002) reports that leaders in general are seen as having vision, providing inspiration, giving people purpose, pushing the boundaries, creating change and innovating through others by coaching and building relationships. These are ways of operating that one might also observe in an inspirational and enterprising online teacher. A common underlying assumption is that there is one leader, but in fact there may be different ways in which group participants contribute to leadership, and numerous ways in which teams of teachers share responsibility for leading online groups.

Group leadership should always be considered in the context of a range of factors that impact group dynamics. Therefore, in this chapter, we begin by reminding ourselves of the different philosophies that underpin online discussion and groupworking, the tasks that learners engage in and the skills that online instructors already have or need to develop. Self-direction is a pivotal concept that moves us into a consideration of emergent leadership in online groups, and specifically, in relation to group composition. We review empirical work concerning leadership styles, social roles, relationships and norms, as well as work on tools and media that may play a role in how collaboration is experienced by