Chapter II

Online Group Projects: Preparing the Instructors to Prepare the Students

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Abstract

This chapter provides an overview of the literature on group projects in online learning and outlines lesson modules for teaching online instructors to use group projects in their courses. The lessons themselves are structured to be an example of online staff development for distance learning faculty. While group projects are often included in on-campus classes, faculty teaching online courses are reluctant to use group projects for these classes. The technology and the students’ acceptance of the online learning environment should be used to extend the pedagogical benefits of group work. With adequate staff development, online instructors can successfully integrate group learning into online classes.

Introduction

Preparing instructors to prepare students to participate in online group projects is an important precursor to successful collaborative projects in computer-supported courses. Lesson modules developed in "The Group Project Project" provided instructors with specific guidance in applying techniques and teaching strategies for collaborative online projects. Interviews with instructors and students participating in online collaboration and group projects, as well as reviews of published research, were influential in determining the content of the instructor preparation modules.
Student collaborative learning and the resulting learning communities are important elements in online teaching, both in principle and in practice. It is the vibrant sense of community of learners that makes successful online courses so rewarding for participants. Group projects need to be considered in the overall instructional plan for usefulness, timeliness, and instructional quality. However, many instructors teaching online classes are themselves new to online teaching and learning. They need guidance in setting up and delivering instruction for their students to fully engage in an online collaborative learning experience. Providing this guidance was the goal of *The Group Project Project*.

*The Group Project Project* incorporates theories and methods learned, and applies them to online lessons targeting instructors. The project focused on the development of lesson modules (or learning objects) that are intended to be used as part of a larger course. These modules include guidelines and specific “how to’s” for instructors, based on reported research in collaborative group projects in online learning. These lessons are designed to prepare instructors to prepare students to participate in online group projects and to apply techniques and teaching strategies for collaborative learning to online group projects. With this set of flexible instructional modules, the basic elements of online group projects can be passed on to instructors either individually or as a group. These modules instruct faculty members on the theory and process for including group projects in their own online course work. Preparation of instructors and students for online collaboration and group projects are critical to their success.

**Background**

Online collaboration and group projects can provide important learning experiences and are appropriate for inclusion in most online courses (Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001). Through group project work, students are presented with opportunities to use multiple learning styles, practice communication skills, and engage in critical thinking. Students come together, work through issues and plans, agree to division of labor, and share ideas. When students are adequately prepared for collaborative work and the task or project assignment is appropriate, students can accomplish the project activities successfully and deliver a product that fulfills a broad range of learning objectives. Online learning offers significant benefits of an asynchronous, on-demand, just-in-time learning environment. However, these benefits add a level of complexity to collaboration and group project work. Project work methods must be learned and applied to online group project work in any discipline.

Considerable research is available in the field of collaboration in teaching and learning. Dillenbourg and Schneider (1995) describe collaborative learning as a situation where two or more students interactively build a joint solution to some problem. Tinzmann et al. (1990) provide guidelines for “a thinking curriculum” that includes “in-depth learning; involving students in real-world, relevant tasks; engaging students in holistic tasks; and utilizing students’ prior knowledge.” An important component of collaboration is the discussion that occurs during project work, since verbal exchanges among the group participants provide the cognitive benefits of collaborative learning (Pressley & McCormick, 1995).
Getting Time to Teach: The Adoption of Online Courses by University Professors
Scott Reid (2014). *Cases on Critical and Qualitative Perspectives in Online Higher Education* (pp. 79-97).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/getting-time-teach/96106?camid=4v1a

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