Chapter IX

Use and Mis-Use of Technology for Online, Asynchronous, Collaborative Learning

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Abstract

Online learners are typically considered to be isolated learners, except for occasional opportunities to post views on an electronic bulletin board. This is not the team orientation that is so central to collaborative learning (CL) theory. Why does formal CL receive so little attention in online instruction? First, the teachers who do value CL generally are traditional educators and not involved in online instruction. Second, online teachers often have little understanding or appreciation for the formalisms of CL. In this chapter, electronic bulletin boards, although universally used, are shown to provide poor support for Collaborative Learning. As a better alternative, shared-document conferencing environments that allow learning teams to create academic deliverables are discussed. Finally, examples are given of well-known CL techniques, illustrating how these are implemented with shared-document conferencing.
Introduction

Can you list the reasons why so many traditional classroom teachers refuse to use cooperative or collaborative learning (CL)? Now add the reasons why even fewer distance educators use the formalisms of CL. It is easy to understand why there is great need for more books on computer-supported collaborative learning.

In traditional classrooms, collaborative learning is appreciated only by a relatively few hard-core devotees (Cooper, 1995). But, these devotees generally fail to use Internet technologies to enrich their use of CL. Distance educators, who can be counted on to use the Internet, seem least likely to appreciate CL. Why do these paradoxes exist?

Without data, there can be only speculation. In the case of the traditional classroom, many teachers may be technophobes. In the case of distance educators, it is possible that they think they already practice collaborative learning via the discussion boards that are almost universally used in distance education courses. An explanation will be given later as to why true CL cannot be accomplished easily on a discussion board.

Individual achievement in the real world typically depends on how well a person can work with other people. Some students are more effective group learners than others, but experience has shown that all students need improvement in this area. This deficiency is most conspicuous with students in competitive educational tracks, such as pre-professional (law, medicine) or graduate school. Such students became competitive to gain admission to selective professional or graduate schools. This does not mean that they cooperate well. Upon commencement of their professions, however, they may need to work collaboratively. Most young lawyers work for large law firms with a large stable of diverse clients. Physicians depend on a variety of staff and often the other physicians in a group practice. The professional working alone in an ivory tower is a myth — professionals typically work in teams and must always network with peers in their field. They cooperate and collaborate with their peers to cultivate a reputation, to be published in the quality journals, to secure prestigious positions, to garner awards, and to obtain grant funding. Communication skills therefore are often more important for success in life than expertise or intelligence (Goleman, 1995).

Team learning in online computer conferences is not widely practiced, but it can be very effective, even more so than face-to-face collaborative learning (Klemm, 1995, 1996, 1998). Klemm (1995, 1998b) suggested that asynchronous computer conferencing could make CL more effective than team learning in face-to-face traditional classroom environments. The reasons include:

- All students can find the time to do their share of the work. No longer do they have the excuse of conflicting work or study schedules.
- Thinking is more focused and clear because everything is done in writing.
- Everybody is more accountable. Everyone sees what everyone else is doing (and not doing).
- All inputs are organized and archived for later review and update.
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