

Why Encourage Student Interaction and Collaboration?

Online course communication tools enable students to interact with course content, the instructor, and their peers outside of the classroom. Students are given the opportunity to negotiate the meaning of course content through these interactions - creating the potential for a deeper and longer lasting learning.

A virtual learning community that provides support and sharing among its members can be built through the integration of online communication tools and course activities and sustained through effective facilitation by the instructor.

Fundamental principles of constructivism support this view: learning is an active process of constructing rather than acquiring knowledge individuals learn through interaction with their world individuals develop knowledge through social interaction.

Changing Roles in Online Learning Environments

Instructor Role:

<u>Face to Face</u>	<u>Online</u>
-from lecturer	
-from provider of answers	-to guide and resource provider
-from provider of content	-to expert questioner
-from total control of the teaching environment	-to designer of student learning experiences
-from teacher-directed to	-to sharing with the student as a fellow learner
	-to learner centered

Source: Berge, Collins, 1996

Learner Role: towards more collaborative/cooperative interaction with peers

Learner Role:

<u>Face to Face</u>	<u>Online</u>
-from passive receptacles	-to constructors of their own knowledge
-from memorizers of facts	-to problem-solvers
-from passive learning	-to active learning

Source: Berge, Collins, 1996

Certain researchers suggest that a teaching method which encapsulates collaboration and interaction would likely work well within the framework of Internet based distance education courses. In order to verify how interaction and collaboration work between students in distance education courses, we observed and researched two undergraduate university courses offered via the Internet. All communications were text based and in asynchronous mode relying upon e-mail, group discussions and hypertext navigation to facilitate the collaborative work process. This exploratory study has enabled us to identify some problematic elements which can hamper collaboration between distance education students. From these results, we developed recommendations for ensuring the success of collaborative assignments for future Internet courses.

From what we have observed and analyzed, the following recommendations have been compiled in order to ensure optimal conditions for collaboration via the Internet :

- Collaborative tasks should be an integral element of the course design and should be offered at regular intervals. As much as possible, collaborative tasks have to be evaluated on equal par with individual work.
- Distance learners should be encouraged to construct learning together through meaningful collaborative tasks which allow for pertinent interaction. These

collaborative tasks must be based upon a constructivist approach rather than a transmission type approach.

- Group composition has to be undertaken with great care by attempting to match personal, professional, cultural and academic backgrounds.
- It is necessary to indicate that collaboration via the Internet did not work well within the parameters of first year courses, which attracts a multitude of students with diverse academic backgrounds. Research has shown that collaboration works well with a professional or graduate course where the level of homogeneity among students is much higher (Muffoletto, 1997).

For more information, the two actual articles are located at:

<http://www.cmu.edu/teaching/technology/bestpractices.html>

http://ifets.ieee.org/periodical/vol_3_2000/d11.html