



Resources for Online Learners

Collaborative Learning Strategies

Online learning doesn't always occur in isolation; your studies may also involve a considerable amount of collaborative learning. This collaborative learning may occur through a combination of live or *synchronous* computer networking (where participants interact in real-time through typed messages), and *asynchronous* networking (where interaction is continued over a period of time through e-mail-like messages).

Collaborative learning activities are those in which there is a positive interdependence among students' goal attainment. That is, students perceive that they can reach their goals *if and only if* the other students in the learning group also reach their goals.

Collaborative learning requires a high level of initiative and self-direction on the part of the student. Good planning is essential, particularly when the group members are geographically separated.

Participating in Collaborative Discussion

One of the most common blocks to effective participation in collaborative activities is the belief that a comment has to be brilliant or novel to be worthwhile. While we may not admit it or even realize it, we often fear to speak because we fear our comments will be seen as trivial, and therefore ignored.

Keep in mind that here are a wide variety of ways to contribute to a group discussion:

- Ask for clarification or restate what someone else has said to make sure you understand.
- Give examples or ask for examples to clarify meaning.
- State in your own words what you think the assignment or topic is about.
- Add to what someone else had said.
- State ways in which your interpretation differs from another's.
- State or question the meaningfulness or usefulness of new material in understanding previous topics.
- If two members of the group are misunderstanding each other, try to mediate.
- Ask or state how new material contradicts, substantiates, or amplifies an earlier point.

Group Problem-solving

When collaboration takes the form of a group problem-solving exercise, the student reaps additional benefits. Individual members learn and often modify their own problem-solving behavior based on the group process. While there is no "right" approach, this process typically consists of the following steps:

1. Group members exchange ideas and information relevant to the problem;
2. Methods for solving or at least attacking the problem are shared, and resources identified
3. Roles are assigned and plans made to work the problem;

4. Additional information relevant to solving the problem is gathered;
5. The results of the research are analyzed and possible solutions identified;
6. Consensus is reached on the best solution; and
7. A report and/or presentation is developed to share the results with others.

While this process will be modified based on the needs and characteristics of the group and its members, the effectiveness of the group in accomplishing these tasks will depend on the following:

- a comfortable, non-threatening atmosphere
- participation by each member
- good understanding of the problem and expectations
- rational examination of disagreements
- consensus-based decision-making
- frank and open criticism
- freedom to express feelings
- clear assignments and commitment to complete them

The following guidelines are provided to help you make the most of your collaborative learning projects.

1. *Assign a specific role to each group member.* These roles may be based on personal preference or practical considerations, and may be combined based on member availability and expertise. New roles should be renegotiated for each project. Some of the possibilities include:
 - Coordinator
 - Recorder
 - Researcher
 - Resource person (for a topic)
 - Writer
 - Editor
 - Presenter

Another way to approach the issue of roles is to divide the project into logical sections and assign each member a particular section. In this scenario, functional roles such as coordination, writing and presentation are shared by each member.

2. *Apply proven group facilitation skills.* These skills include:
 - *Contributing* - providing relevant information to the work group
 - *Crystallizing* - interpreting and restating the essence of someone else's remarks
 - *Focusing* - keeping the exchange on track
 - *Introducing/Closing* - setting, changing, and terminating the direction of the work process as needed

- *Questioning* - involving the other members and bringing forth needed data, opinions, and ideas.
 - *Supporting* - encouraging members and reducing tension when it builds
3. *Watch for intergroup conflicts.* Some of the problems that require prompt intervention include:
- attacking
 - blocking
 - competing
 - dominating
 - fooling around
 - disrupting
 - boasting or status seeking
 - sarcasm
 - pleading special interest
 - sympathy seeking
 - drifting off track
 - withdrawing

Collaborative Learning on the Computer

Computer networking is well-suited as a medium for collaborative learning. Experienced computer networkers describe the sense of community among participants created by frequent communication and interaction based on democratic principles and mutual support. Networking may even provide a medium for an entirely new group problem-solving methodology.



Of all educational media, computer networking has the greatest potential for bringing together individual skills, abilities, ideas, attitudes, and values. The potential of networking to contribute to collaborative learning can be best appreciated by considering the principles on which successful group problem-solving is based:

- *Dynamism.* Group problem-solving depends on an ever-changing exchange of ideas. The on-line editing capability of the computer enables users to elaborate, emphasize, condense, rearrange, exemplify, and retransmit any user's entry.
- *Anonymity.* Individual ownership and responsibility for ideas can foster competition, secrecy, or fear of sharing. Computer networking can preserve user anonymity, thereby reducing these traditional inhibitions to involvement, productivity and creativity.
- *Accessibility.* The easier it is to access ideas and information, the greater the likelihood of user involvement in the cooperative learning process. Computer networking allows users to modify the nature of the conferencing process in order to make it more flexible and user-friendly.
- *Control.* The most successful learning experiences occur when the participants have some control over the learning medium. An on-line discussion can be continually restructured to respond to the changing needs of the learners

Additional Resources

Zimmerman, A. L. & Evans, C. J. (1992). *Facilitation : From discussion to decision*. Southbend, IN: Interax Corp.(800-560-4489).

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Hunter, D., Bailey, A., & Taylor, B. (1995). *Zen of groups : A handbook for people meeting with a purpose*. Tucson, AZ: Fisher Books.

Luotto, J. A. & Stoll, E. L. (2001). *Communication skills for collaborative learning (2nd ed.)*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.

Johnson, D. W. & Johnson, R. T. (1998). *Learning together and alone : Cooperative, competitive, and individualistic learning*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Bruffee, K. A. (1999). *Collaborative learning: Higher education, interdependence, and the authority of knowledge*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Stewart, G. L., Manz, C. C. & Sims, H. P. (1998). *Team work and group dynamics*. New York: John Wiley.

[Collaborative Learning and the Internet](http://tecfa.unige.ch/tecfa/research/CMC/colla/iccai95_1.html)

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