Peer-to-Peer eLearning and the Team Effect on Course Completion

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Abstract
This paper examines successful strategies for collaborative online study and uses as a case study the Advanced Certificate of Internet Marketing, an award-winning 16-week business course, delivered 100% online, which 85% of students have completed to date.

1. The Internet environment

The Internet is at its best when it brings people together. It is perhaps most powerful and exciting as a communication and collaboration tool. It should perhaps be no surprise that, in using the Internet as a learning tool, some of the most significant effects can be seen where it brings student together with student, and allows the tutor to guide a collaborative learning journey.

2. Peer-to-Peer Dimensions

The eLearning community is increasingly recognising the importance of students learning from their study peers. When peers come together in a learning context they form an Online Learning Community. Tu & Corry (2002) [1] summarise Online Learning Communities as having 4 basic components:

- **Community** - occurring with social interaction about common interests
- **Learning** - non-formal; the attainment of knowledge, skills, and attitudes through social interaction with peers
- **Network** - defined as a pattern of communications and relationships (Schuler, 1996)
- **Technology** - either a synchronous or asynchronous platform

In some instances eLearning can foster a greater degree of communication and closeness among students and tutors than face to face learning. (Knight, Ridley, & Davies, 1998) [2] (Waschull, 1997)[3]. This paper shares experiences of these factors and hypothesises that the peer-to-peer dimensions contribute to the exceptional course completion levels.

3. Course Completion – a challenge

Average completion rates for online courses vary but are generally cited at between 25% and 70% (Hill & Raven, 2000)[4], (Ganzel, 2001)[5].

4. Case Study: Course Background

- Business course to teach experience professionals strategies appropriate to online business
- 14 in depth modules studied over 16 weeks
- 100% Internet delivery
- 24 x 7 tutor support
- Study groups of 5-7 peers
- Rich content and a collaborative environment
- Scheduled group discussions and group project
- Assessment by test results, individual submissions, contribution to group work and ‘spirit’ of collaboration demonstrated
- Employers generally pay the NZ$2,695 fee.

4.1 Constructivism demanded collaboration

Teaching Internet business and marketing is, to a great extent, a lesson in collaboration and communication. In the Internet business world, the power structures are radically new and people need to gain confidence in working with, rather than in opposition to, competitors, suppliers and customers.

The Advanced Certificate of Internet Marketing was built with a constructivist methodology and so team collaboration is an essential component. The course teaches about the Internet, over the Internet in the spirit of the Internet. Students must collaborate to pass.

4.2 Dimensions applied

**Community members - student Profile** - Students are 60% female, business and marketing professionals, resident in NZ, Australia, Canada. All students are computer users with varying degrees of PC literacy. All use email. A small minority have studied online before. The course content presupposes an interest in the Internet and most students are employed by major corporates. The communities are forged in the fire of shared business challenges and a high-change, real world environment. It is acknowledged that this demographic is likely to be amongst the earliest adopting and most pre-disposed to eLearning. This doubtless contributes to completion rates and results.

**The Learning** - Within the constructivist framework explained above, the course operates on a four-step approach:

- Concepts are introduced and explained
- The application of these concepts is demonstrated through the introduction of case studies and reference sites
Students are asked to relate this learning to their own work and life experience. Students are given structures for sharing this experience with their study peers.

The course was authored, and is delivered, using The eLearning Engine from GuideTools.com – a system combining authoring, content management, learning management, testing and groupware. The groupware combines a built-in pre-addressed ‘email’ option on every page of content. Group emails go to both the individuals’ nominated email address and are accessible with a password, as a discussion thread, from the course homepage.

4.6 A mixed format approach

Tutored: The course is self-directed but with constant online tutor supervision and a suggested timetable for completion. The tutor’s role becomes largely that of Guide, to support students’ study journey and foster a healthy group dynamic. The first Tutor communication is in the familiar mode of email and introduces students to the online content and the concept of group study. The second Tutor email asks each student to post an email introduction to their groups and models the behaviour by sharing their own, warm and informal, introduction. A deadline is set for the task.

Student progress and participation are closely monitored and ‘warning behaviours’ have been benchmarked, to trigger tutor responses to indicators with a high risk of a student drop out.

Throughout the course, seven tutor specified group discussions are required. The tutor allocates a subject, and nominates a team member to lead the discussion, by email. The nominee is responsible for the first submission, coaxing responses from co-students, for achieving a consensus and for submitting the combined response to the tutor, to deadline. Each team member has a turn as the nominated discussion leader.

Content specified submissions: The content engages students by regular requests to submit opinion, experience or outtakes of content to the study group.

The group project: During the last 4 weeks of study, students are required to run a self-directed team project to create a mini business plan for a fictional company, using the knowledge, skills and team rapport gained during the learning journey. The group project is issued by email to the group but the group is responsible for self-organising, allocating tasks, peer reviewing, nominating an editor, debating points of disagreement and producing a final report to deadline.

4.7 Outcomes:

- Achievement – academic achievements are ahead of expectations. Students engage in complex discussions, sharing professional and ‘customer’ experiences relevant to course material, which broadens understanding and increases learning. This adds an immediacy and relevance to concepts that might otherwise remain remote and abstract.
- Enjoyment – students are enthusiastic about concepts during the study experience.
- Team bond and real world networks – it is common for study groups, as they reach the end of their learning journey, and who have never met, to plan to meet. They form an online study fellowship during the course that translates into offline life, beyond study.
- 85% course completion

4.8 The following success criteria have been observed:

- Asynchronous discussion allows for reflective study followed by complex exchanges and genuine collaboration in the application of theory.
- Tutor guidance and commitment – as discussions are fully monitored any misconceptions or ‘group alarm’ can be coached through. Support and encouragement boosts morale and student esteem.
- Quality and richness of course material
- Transparency and ease of use of technology
- Demographic of students
- Collaborative experience in learning from peers

4.9 Accountability - the X Factor?

It is hypothesised that the team bonds that form in the study community during the collaborative study process are, however, the X factor in achievement of the outstanding completion rates. The student co-dependency of a peer-to-peer study environment motivates them to complete and makes them accountable to each other. Accountability is a key driver for completion (Neal, 2002) [6].

This paper will be presented with examples of work and dialogue.