Online Collaborative Learning: Have We Overcome the Obstacles?

J. M. McInerney
Bundaberg, Queensland 4670, Australia
cowlrick@bigpond.com
‘Phone: +61 7 4155 1649

Tim S Roberts
Central Queensland University
Bundaberg, Queensland 4670, Australia
t.roberts@cqu.edu.au
‘Phone: +61 7 4150 7057
fax: +61 7 4150 7090

Abstract

Collaborative learning techniques are still largely disregarded within higher education. This paper investigates the reasons why the practice of collaborative learning within a tertiary environment is still seen as largely problematical.

Introduction

Many educational institutions are currently seeking to re-engineer their degree programs to match the needs of a changing market place. The irony at this time is that as the fierce competitiveness of the market place increases, so too does the collaborative and cooperative nature of work forces in many commercial enterprises. This means that if our educational institutions do not teach their students to work together – collaborate – they may well find their own students marginalized as prospective employees.

Defining the terms

The term “collaborative” means to work in a group of two or more to achieve a common goal while respecting each individuals contribution to the whole: note that one does not have to be on-line to be a part of a collaborative team. Collaborative learning is a learning method that uses social interaction as a means of knowledge building [5].

The term “cooperative” is often used interchangeably with “collaborative”, but they have different literal meanings. Cooperative means to work or act together as one to achieve a common goal and tends to de-emphasize the input of particular individuals [3]. The difficult aspect for some, but not necessarily all, students, whether school leavers or mature age, is that collaboration has often been encouraged in their school or workplace, but is not always encouraged at the tertiary level.

On-line Collaborative Learning at the Tertiary Level

As an ever-increasing number of students find that they need to work to pay for their education, universities have had to adapt their courses to enable increased use of the on-line environment to communicate with and educate both their existing and potential student base as well as potential employers.

Populations, whether academic or mainstream, do not grow with any confidence if their members do not embrace and become literate in those technologies that will let them be a part of the growing global village. Educators have to understand that they cannot simply translate current lectures and tutorials to the on-line environment. They have to utilize the latest technologies to the benefit of both the institutions and the students.

In the case of on-line collaborative learning, all the students in a group have to work together to achieve a common goal even though each student is primarily responsible for their own individual effort and assessment [1].

An examination of the existing literature in this area suggests the following basic guidelines for educators seeking to implement collaborative learning techniques:

• Design the on-line flexible course so as to enable collaborative learning,
• Establish rules at the beginning of the course,
• Do not allow individual students to dominate discussion,
• Ask specific questions of the group as a whole and also address questions to specific groups of students,
• Assign the role of gatekeeper to students on a rotational basis so that each student learns to be responsible for the behavior of the group,
• Summarize contributions and ask for comments on the topics being discussed, and
• Conduct a mid-course assessment to ascertain how the course is progressing.

Johnson and Johnson [2] advise of three shortcomings of individual or isolated on-line learning:
• Individual work isolates students,
• Individual instruction limits the resources and the technology available, and
• Individualized instruction greatly increases development and hardware costs.

Panitz [4] lists several reasons why academics may not rush to utilize collaborative learning in their courses, whether on-line or face-to-face, but the top four in our opinion are:
• Possible loss of control in the classroom,
• Possible lack of self confidence,
• Possible fear of the loss of content coverage, and
• Possible damage to the ego.

Student Perspectives

As with most of the research in the area of collaborative learning the vast majority of the written research on student perceptions is from the K-12 perspective. However, much can be extrapolated from this research if it is combined with what little has been written on on-line collaborative learning at the tertiary level. Collaborative learning should teach students to understand the importance of teamwork, and will make it easier for them to be integrated into the workplace. We know that collaborative learning means more preparation for the academic but also that such experiments can be very successful [2].

One of the more positive effects of on-line collaborative learning is that the student is able to participate in collaboration outside of normal class or work time. This makes it an ideal method for traditional distance students who are unable to attend a campus due to either distance or work. Simply because there is no face-to-face interaction between students it becomes essential that we take the time to teach our students, both distance and on-campus, to communicate in the on-line environment.

Social Relationships

Panitz [4] suggests 59 benefits of collaborative learning. Many of the points apply to the on-line collaborative environment as practices at the tertiary level indicating that the prime objective of collaborative learning is that of enhancing the self-esteem of the students. It also encourages the students to be aware of and interact with each other thereby promoting social and academic relationships.

Should it be the responsibility of tertiary institutions to develop social awareness in their students or is that the prerequisite and mandate of parents? The answer to that question is a resounding yes; it is the responsibility of tertiary institutions to develop social awareness in their students, with the caveat that it is also the parents’ responsibility to ensure that their children become socially aware and interact harmoniously with others prior to starting at the tertiary level.

Summary

This paper has described in a relatively informal way a broad outline of on-line collaborative learning at the tertiary level, discussed student perspectives of the process, and the strengths and sometimes the weaknesses of online collaborative learning, and has suggested that much depends upon the student perspectives and social relationships engendered by the structure and content of the courses.

References


