# Chapter 1
# Strategies for Meaningful Collaboration in Online Environments

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines the complexities of creating a collaborative community in online classes. A fully online Master's of Education program is studied, with students being surveyed regarding their experiences with collaboration in the online courses. Results of the study are discussed, along with recommendations for establishing a sense of community in the online environment. Recommendations include structuring introductory activities for the instructor and students, providing opportunities for authentic collaboration and communication through tools such as blogs and wikis, and following guidelines for establishing effective group projects in an online class. Suggestions for future research are also included. Overall, a case is made for the importance of creating meaningful, collaborative experiences for students within the context of class content in online courses.*

## INTRODUCTION

Online education presents unique challenges for both learners and educators, including creating a sense of community conducive to peer collaboration. While creating such learning environments has been well-studied in face-to-face settings, creating such learning opportunities in online settings is a continuing topic for research. This chapter explores prior research on collaboration in the online environment as well as best practices to support these efforts. An empirical mixed methods study is described along with strategies found to be effective.

## BACKGROUND

Throughout recent history, the education system in the United States has been playing catch-up in terms of its use of technology. As students are becoming more technologically savvy, the need for instructors to increase their use of technology is becoming more and more apparent. Today's students expect and demand more than an instructor lecturing for hours or copying notes off of a whiteboard for the entire class session. Technology can provide alternatives to these traditional ways of teaching. A current technology trend is online teaching. However, if not developed correctly, online classes can turn into an electronic version of the traditional lecture routine. When designing online classes, it is imperative that instructors consider the communication, interaction, and collaboration among students in an effort to provide a supportive and engaging learning environment. Establishing this type of collaborative community is challenging in a traditional face-to-face classroom and is even more so when students are not in the same physical space.

## TRENDS IN ONLINE EDUCATION

Online education is a field that continues to expand in both K12 and higher ed. According to Abamu (2018), fully online degree programs are more prevalent than ever. Enrollment in online courses in higher education has increased for the past 14 years. Between 2016-2017, the number of all students who took courses online grew 5.7 percent (Lederman, 2018). Close to 32% of higher education students have taken at least one online course (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). According to Seaman et al. (2018), growth of distance enrollments has gone up regardless of both economic trends and overall higher education enrollment trends.

## LEARNING AS A SOCIAL ACTIVITY

Many prominent educational theorists have recognized the importance of the social aspect of learning. Dewey (1916) discussed the importance of using conversation, interaction with others, and opportunities to apply new knowledge as keys to the learning process. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development also recognized the importance of interaction with others who are more knowledgeable and can facilitate one's learning. Kagan's work (2001) in the arena of cooperative learning has demonstrated the mutual gains students receive when they work together to complete a task. However, before groups

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