

Chapter 7

Creating Collaboration in Global Online Learning: Case Studies

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors address the question of how educators can create collaborative learning in online courses, especially in those courses that occur in a global context. They use constructivism as a theoretical framework, and they review the literature related to collaborative learning, learner-centered teaching, groups in online learning, cultural competence in online teaching, and research on online learning. The authors present two case studies, one in which collaborative learning occurred, and one in which the collaborative component was less developed, even though the content of the courses were the same and the same educator facilitated the courses. The authors conclude the chapter by suggesting areas of further research on collaboration in online learning.

INTRODUCTION

Most online learning management systems support a traditional instructional design model in which the educator makes all of the decisions about the learning, presents information, and tests learners' understanding of that information. Yet, adult education in general advocates a collaborative and cooperative learning environment and a learner-centered approach to teaching. As the use of online learning expands dramatically in higher

and adult education and in global communities, we need to pay attention to how collaboration works in the online environment.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

How can educators create a collaborative learning environment in an online context? We know that face-to-face courses cannot simply be transferred to an online environment; we need to take into

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account the important differences between face-to-face teaching and online teaching, but we know little about how collaboration can be encouraged successfully online. In this chapter, we provide a theoretical framework for thinking about this issue and review the literature in related areas: collaborative learning, learner-centered teaching, groups in online learning, cultural competence in online teaching, and research on online learning. We discuss strategies for fostering collaborative online learning, and we present two case studies that allow us to examine factors that may play a role in collaborative online learning in a global context.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for collaborative learning rests in constructivism, a theoretical perspective that has a long history in adult education, beginning with Lindemann (1926) and in education in general (Piaget, Dewey). Constructivism is a broad orientation to learning and, as such, it incorporates a variety of perspectives. Essentially, it means that individuals understand their experiences by constructing their own meaning rather than relying on authority or searching for an objective truth that exists separately and independently from the experience. In the constructivist framework, learners are active rather than passive—learning occurs through discussion, collaboration, experiential activities, and engagement with ideas and events.

Many theorists distinguish between personal constructivism and social constructionism. Personal constructivism focuses on the way individuals make meaning based on their personal experiences, and social constructionism is concerned with the social or collective meaning that is shaped by cultural and social norms and which give meaning to how individuals see the world. Constructivism also plays a predominant role in the

understanding of adult development and racial and ethnic identity theories (Smith & Taylor, 2010), both of which may be relevant to thinking about collaboration in online environments.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

For decades educators and especially adult educators have embraced the idea of collaborative learning. While the basic premises of a constructivist perspective of learning and knowledge creation anchor most collaborative learning exercises, the goals and activities used by educators can be quite diverse. Often the term *collaborative* is used for any time a group of individuals are working together for a common result such as project teams, problem based learning, group case analysis, simulations or games, peer mentoring, collaborative scientific research, and collaborative discussion groups (Swan, Shen, & Hiltz, 2006). For the purpose of this chapter, collaborative learning is presented as a democratic process where the teacher or facilitator “values and builds upon the knowledge, personal experiences, language, strategies, and cultures that the learners bring to learning. The instructor models the collaborative learning process by allowing the learners’ knowledge to both challenge and reshape their own thinking” (Smith, 2010, p. 149). This entails the learners’ active engagement in the construction of knowledge and shared authority in the classroom or learning space. Bruffee (1999) suggests that there are two key elements of this type of collaborative learning: interdependency and knowledge authority or intersubjectivity. Interdependency in a collaborative learning setting occurs when individuals identify with the group and commonly held goals are built through consensus. The collaborative consensus process “can promote mutual respect and help people place concern for the common good above immediate self-interest” (Brookfield & Preskill, 2009, p. 34) while knowledge authority

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