Online Learning Teams

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INTRODUCTION

Team player, a familiar expression in many educational and workplace environments, is also an important component of online learning environments. The inclusion of teams and groups in discussions, group projects, problem-solving exercises, and role playing activities is a vital part of teaching and learning that encourages students' social interaction and leadership skills. The need for students in online environments to acquire and use social skills such as cooperative learning skills, group discussion strategies, and conflict resolution skills, that are traditionally included in face-to-face teaching and learning environments is an intrinsic goal of online teaching and learning. A brief historical perspective of the development of online learning programs highlights some of the factors that have influenced the need for including student teams in online learning environments.

Although the first semblance of online learning programs is credited to various locations around the world in the late 1980's and early 1990's, programs resembling online or distance learning environments are historically evidenced as early as 1840. The initiation of a correspondence shorthand course in 1840 by Sir Isaac Pitman spurred the British Empire to take hold of distance learning (Online Education Resources, 2007). The United States paralleled the distance learning effort by generating over 300 correspondence schools by 1926 (Online Education Resources, 2007)**.** However, the surge of distance learning efforts was evidenced in the late 1960s with the founding of the Internet. Online education emerged from the origination of ARPAnet, the United States Department of Defense's Advanced Research Project Agency, in 1969 (Moodledocs, 2007, February)**.** ARPAnet later became known as the Internet, a communications network used by the military and universities for research and scientific investigations to support documents distributed world-wide (Hauben, n.d.)**.** Internet spawned the emergence of online learning environments during the 1970's 1980's with many e-learning (electronic learning) programs offering educational coursework in virtually all subject areas. The release of Blackboard and WebCT 1.0 software platforms in 1997 solidified online learning as an icon in American education arenas (Moodledocs, 2007, February)**.** The demand for online education surged in the United States in the year 2000 with the skyrocketing use of personal home computers and the explosive need for working adults to continue their postsecondary education goals (Online Degree Search, 2004, May 31). The growth of online learning and e-based educational environments in the 21st Century continues to progress at exponential rates.

BACKGROUND

The fast pace demand for online learning and e-based instructional environments in the United States prompted many questions, concerns, and criticisms by educators and the public regarding the quality of online learning as compared with traditional face-to-face classroom learning. The prominent question dominating the field is the following: "do online courses adequately substitute for on-site courses?' (Grubbs, 2000, September 19, para. 5) A key area of concern inherent in this question is the degree of social interaction and student involvement and participation in online learning versus on-site learning. Although course content is considered as an important component of both online and face- to-face learning, critics of online learning question the degree of social interaction and student engagement as the key issue for comparing online learning with face-to-face learning environments. Proponents of e-learning suggest that online delivery must contain quality structured content, opportunities for question and answer considerations, and interactivity between learners and their peers (Grubbs, 2000, September 19; Online Education Resources, 2007; Jana, 1999, September 15). The British Open University provides several electronic resources that support structure and general guidance for assisting student teams in online project development and implementation (Bissell, 2001).

Early literature accounts of online versus face-to-face learning debates from the late 1990's focused on two types of online interactive discussions, that is synchronous versus asynchronous online environments (Jana, 1999, September 15). Synchronous e-learning environments require students to be on Internet and in the online classroom at scheduled times whereas asynchronous e-learning environments allow students to work in the online classroom in their own time preferences (Jana, 1999, September 15). One of the first synchronous online learning programs was initiated by the CALCampus launch of the QuantumLink campus program in 1995 whereby "administration, real-time classroom instruction, and materials were provided" with students interacting with the teacher and other classmates (Morabito, 2007, para. 6). The CALCampus real-time student interaction and live teacher-student discussions from various locations around the world prompted an international justification for online learning as an effective educational environment with demonstrated evidence of social interaction among online students and teacher (Morabito, 2007). Global education and social interaction was also supported by asynchronous online learning programs such as Univerisitas 21 Global and the University of Phoenix in the late 1990's with a strong focus on group or team learning configurations whereby students solve problems online in teams (Grayson, 2005, August 16).

Both face-to-face and online 21st century learning environments have determined that richer learning occurs within learning communities comprised of groups, cohorts, or teams of students to include communications that are academic as well as personal in nature (Misanchuk & Anderson, 2001; Stein & Hurd, 2005-2006). In online learning environments these learning communities are known as virtual learning communities (Misanchuk & Anderson, 2001). Virtual learning communities do not contain the physical presence luxury of face-to-face learning communities where students and teacher interact in classrooms with physical cues, body language, visual signs and verbal communications. Virtual learning environments have a high propensity for learner isolation if no efforts are made to structure groups of learners into active interactions. Misanchuk and Anderson (2001) argue that regardless whether learning occurs in face-to-face classrooms or in virtual classrooms there are three necessary kinds of interactions, i.e., learner to content, learner to instructor, and learner to learner. Online learning environments have

readily accepted the responsibility of learner to content and learner to instructor connections as evidenced by the detailed content delivery methods available within e-learning platforms and the personal online and email communication systems between learner and instructor in virtual learning environments. The major concern in virtual learning environments is the potential for students to interact with their peers or learner to learner interaction as student teams. An example of a rich model for teaming is the Fielding Institute in California where courses are taught online in an interactive environment with small teams of students (McGeachy, 2006). With the rapid advances in 21st century technologies the use of student groups or teams online as collaborative learners is now a very feasible and electronically cost effective activity (Curry, 2001). Today's technologies provide avenues for students in online environments to engage in peer discussions, problem solving activities, group cooperative writing efforts, and team presentations. The move in online learning toward a concentrated approach to cooperative team environments carries with it the challenges and responsibilities of the instructor and the learner to provide the highest quality of peer engagement and interactions for effective cooperative learning to occur (Curry, 2001).

ONLINE LEARNING TEAMS: CHALLENGES

The use of student teams or cooperative learning groups in online environments implies challenges in virtual environments that parallel and sometimes surpass the challenges of student teams in face-to-face learning environments. Sharing responsibility, leadership, control, communications, flexibility, scheduling, courtesy, and production are key considerations of learning teams in both face-to-face and online environments. Cooperating and working as a unit using productive team-building skills directed toward common goals are characteristics of highly effective learning teams whether in face-to-face or online learning environments. In essence, those elements that determine effective cooperative learning by teams of students in face-to-face classrooms mirror those same components in the online learning environment (Stein & Hurd, 2005-2006 & Curry, 2001). However, there are challenges in online environments that seemingly correspond to face-to-face environments but require a greater degree of formal focus and

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