

## Chapter 5

# Online Learning: A Collaborative Perspective

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The purpose of this chapter is to provide an integrative essay of collaborative learning variables that enhance as well as detract from an e-learning and information technology (IT)-mediated environment. It is common knowledge that a group is only as strong as the individuals who make up the group. Yet in online education there is the assumption that individuals have the skills they need to work within the group successfully. Although there are multiple opportunities for individuals to learn how to interact in a one-on-one setting, there is little formal training on how to work within a group. How to identify, address, and accommodate cultural differences, motivation levels, conflict resolution, expectations, critical thinking, self-organization, and group construction of knowledge are some of the areas that are not typically addressed formally in an academic setting. Successful group projects require that everyone be skilled in these and additional areas to have the potential for an equal and meaningful learning experience as a member of the group. Learning online is a social process involving collaborative efforts which can be mediated by the applications being used.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The purpose of this chapter is to provide an integrative essay to determine the variables that not only enhance but also detract from team members' experience with collaborative learning in an online learning environment. Originally the paper was going to focus only on group collaboration but further research required the expansion of the definition of collaborative learning to include multiple aspects of the learning environment including discussion boards and emails. In addition, cooperative learning will be discussed since the literature supports that individuals may transition between these two types of peer interactions within the same project.

Collaborative learning is defined simply as working together towards a common goal (Haythornthwaite, 2007). Garrison (2005) states the goal of collaboration is to create a community of inquiry where students work together to construct meaningful and useful knowledge. This paper will review the process of group development, group pedagogy, learning factors, individual group member considerations, assessments, options for enhanced group performance and a summary of the findings.

### **Group Development**

Group development models have been studied through traditional group activities. The question to consider is if the same models that have been identified for face-to-face interaction among group members is applicable for group members who are part of an online learning environment. To understand the distinctions made between face-to-face group interactions and online group interactions four commonly accepted models will be reviewed.

Tuckman (1965) developed a four stage, linear process that identified group development as the following four stages known as forming, storming, norming and performing. Each stage is built upon the prior stage. In later years the stage of adjourning was added (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977)

Palloff and Pratt (2001) state that although they agree with the definition of each stage of the Tuckman model they do not agree with the linear, sequential application of the model. Through their experience with online learning they have found, as an example that students may go to storming (conflict) quickly if there is disagreement about the directions of the group assignment.

McClure (1998) proposes that chaos and self-organization is how groups develop. He continues by stating that groups go back and forth between chaos and agreement or harmony and disharmony but groups do not usually reach a true performing

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