

Chapter 18

Examining Graduate Students' Cooperative Learning Experiences in an Online Reading Course

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines one way in which students engage in learning literacy content in an online context utilizing cooperative learning pedagogy, a research-based, best-practice approach to learning. The online course was purposefully developed to integrate the elements of cooperative learning: positive interdependence, student interaction, individual accountability, use of interpersonal/ small group skills, and equal opportunity for success, as referenced papers show. Findings indicate that students had positive learning experiences when utilizing cooperative learning pedagogies in an online environment. Three significant themes emerged from the data analysis: students 1) clearly identified the importance of leadership in the course experience; 2) articulated their appreciation of learning from others; and 3) stated they had an enhanced learning experience through the cooperative learning structure. As more universities, high schools, and elementary schools seek additional options for students to learn online, they should consider cooperative learning as a highly viable option.

INTRODUCTION

With the proliferation of new technologies and learning management systems, the field of education now offers an increasing number of literacy courses, undergraduate and graduate level, in an online context. Yet limited research exists to examine pedagogies of best practice in this online environment (McInnerney & Roberts, 2009). This chapter examines one way in which graduate students can engage in learning critical literacy content in an online context while utilizing cooperative learning pedagogy, a

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research-based, best-practice approach to learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1999; McInnerney & Roberts, 2009, Slavin, 2017).

The purpose of this research was to study and disseminate the ways in which graduate students responded to cooperative learning strategies embedded in an online graduate literacy course. This course is the first in a sequence of required literacy courses in a graduate program, and it focuses on providing teachers the opportunity to extend their knowledge of the reading/language arts processes and the principles underlying effective instruction. Key concepts are drawn from recent research and theory in language learning (Levey & Polirstok, 2011), developmental reading research (Gambrell, Morrow, & Pressley, 2019), and research describing the literacy processes of children (Alvermann, Unrau, Sailors, & Ruddell, 2018).

This research explored the use of cooperative learning strategies in an online literacy course in order to examine ways in which this pedagogy may or may not support student experiences. Thus, the goal of this study focused on adding to the foundation of research regarding whether or not integrated cooperative-learning pedagogy might be advantageous for educators teaching an online course. In its examination of the topic, this chapter addresses the following objectives:

- How does the use of teams in an online class based on cooperative learning methods support or deter the students' learning process and understanding of the material?
- In what ways does the team-based structure impact the students' perceptions of the course and their experiences in the course?

BACKGROUND

Teaching courses in an online environment provides both opportunities and challenges. Though more and more educational systems are utilizing online contexts, little research exists examining these learning experiences. It is thus important to examine the research in the following three areas, 1) the development of online courses, 2) the use of cooperative learning as a highly effective research-based practice, and 3) research articulating students' experiences in online courses.

Developing Online Courses

Research has identified that understanding of content can be facilitated in both an online and a face-to-face environment (Aragon, Johnson, & Shaik, 2002; Harasim, 2017; Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014; Meyer, 2003, Ryan & Barton, 2013, Snyder & Dingus, 2014). This research reported that in either environment students were successful in comprehending and applying material from the courses; in an online environment, however, students could read, reflect, and process content in their own time and way, thus providing them flexibility to engage and internalize their learning. Research conducted by Caverly and MacDonald (1999) found that threaded discussion groups in an online environment “foster higher-level thinking and independence as students collect, evaluate, and create their own learning spaces” (p. 36).

The availability of web-based communication tools is encouraging what Moreillon and Tatarchuk (2003) called an “explosion of discourse communities in cyberspace” (p. 1). Carico and Logan (2004) similarly argued that “the chances for students to experience literacy across time and space are increasing exponentially through technologies” (p. 302). These digital discourse communities, like face-to-face

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