

Chapter 1.12

Collaborative Learning: Using Group Work Concepts for Online Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the concept of collaborative learning and its theoretical and practical foundations. Collaborative learning takes place in a structured social situation where a group of students work as a team to assist each other with learning tasks. The instructional strategies encourage student to student interactions. Drawing on group work skills, collaborative learning has been demonstrated to be effective in a variety of learning situations. Development of a variety of Internet technologies such as communication tools, emails, discussion forums, video and audio tools together with web-casting allow collaborative teaching strategies to be used creatively in online learning. The authors

have trialed the use of various technologies in the human services and several case examples of online collaborative learning are provided. These case studies cover activities such as supervision and controversial issues in social work ethics. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the future directions and the challenges this poses for traditional classroom teaching.

I entered the classroom with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant, not a passive consumer... education as the practice of freedom.... education that connects the will to know with the will to become. Learning is a place where paradise can be created. bell hooks

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INTRODUCTION

Collaborative learning occurs when a group of students work as a team assisting each other with learning tasks. This form of learning began in classrooms and its effectiveness is that setting has been demonstrated. More recently, it is being used in the online environment. Education in social work and more generally in the human services requires an understanding of human relationships and a capacity to work successfully with other people. Collaborative learning, based on group work concepts is widely and successfully used in all social work education to enable student to student interaction to facilitate further learning. Some academics, however question whether online learning is a valuable framework for teaching the fundamental practice skills in the human services. The aim of this chapter is to explore the teaching of social work using the tools and technologies and the application of collaborative learning in an online environment. This chapter will encompass theoretical foundations, application of group work skills to teaching and ways in which collaborative learning is used for online learning. Case studies of collaborative online learning for tertiary social work students will be provided.

CONSTRUCTIVISM: THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Collaborative learning is based on the tradition of constructivist epistemology. Simply, constructivism means that we learn through a process of experiencing and then reflecting on those experiences, a process which is often and best done with others. Through this process we create a different understanding of the world. As we encounter new experiences, we use our past experiences to understand and make sense of new information thus making new connections which are then organized into new forms of knowledge

With this new information, we can then discard knowledge that is no longer relevant.

Many educators have contributed to our understanding of the importance of constructivism in learning including Vygotsky (1978), Rogoff (1990), Lave and Wenger (1991), and Schon (1983, 1987). According to Vygotsky (1978), higher mental functions are enhanced when the more experienced or capable work with the less experienced or capable in social situations. This is referred to as the zone of proximal development. In a similar way, Rogoff (1990) talked about the value of a cognitive apprenticeship in thinking and guided learning. The less experienced are guided by the more experienced in their thinking about complex problem solving. A parallel in human services is the responsibility taken by supervisors in the work place when they share their thinking about solving difficult cases with students and fellow workers. Lave and Wenger (1991) contributed to our understanding of learning by stressing the importance of context in the learning process. They referred to the concept of situated learning with Wenger (1998) elaborating the value of a community of practice (experienced workers) in the construction of new knowledge. They were particularly concerned with how workers developed their professional skills. In the area of professional teaching and learning, Schon (1983, 1987) also acknowledged the importance of social context. In our professional life, much learning whilst tacit does take place in a social context and through dialogue with others. We know though doing activities and we learn through a process of reflection on, and in action. The ramifications of constructivism are the importance of learning in a social context; the significance of more experienced others and peers in the learning process; and the value of real world issues as the focus for learning.

In summary, constructivism has been extensively researched as an educational principle that is well accepted as an approach to facilitating learning in today's educational institutions (Pap-

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