

Chapter 18

Peer Feedback for Enhancing Students' Project Development in Online Learning

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The use of peer feedback is a strategy for online educators to facilitate collaboration among students and increase critical reflection. Through the well-designed use of peer feedback, students can, with help from other students, master concepts and ideas that they cannot understand on their own (Lu & Bol, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978). The process of giving and receiving peer feedback closely resembles professional practice (van den Berg, Admiraal, & Pilot, 2006; van der Pol, van den Berg, Admiraal, & Simons, 2008) and helps students develop life-long skills. This case study describes the use of peer feedback in an online graduate practicum course to support students and increase their exposure to different educational environments. It includes suggestions for effectively using peer feedback in online courses.

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ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

The latest Sloan-C report of online education at US higher education institutions states that over 5.6 million students at took at least one online course during the fall 2009 semester, a 22 percent increase from 2008 (Allen & Seaman, 2010). The College of Education at a large public university in the United States has offered online courses since 2004 and more recently began offering online programs leading to degrees in a Master of Education and Doctor of Education. In fall 2011, a total of 47 courses were offered completely online and 1,700-1,800 students accessed these courses from all 50 states in the US (Campbell, 2011). Online courses are hosted in the Learning Management System Moodle and supported by a team of experts at the college's Office of Distance Learning. Instructors link to several types of online resources in these courses, such as research articles in the education library, podcasts, videos, and external websites. Several instructors also create their own online materials. Interactions in online courses are typically asynchronous interactions between students, between students and the instructor, and between the students and content (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Several courses also include synchronous or real-time sessions using Elluminate software.

The College of Education offers a Master of Education in Educational technology that is completely online. Students enrolled in this program are usually employed as in-service teachers or instructors, instructional designers, and training professionals. Students complete 36 credits of online courses to achieve their degree, including a 16-week practicum that they have to successfully complete to graduate. The practicum consists of a teacher inquiry/action research project that students implement in their practice and that is supervised virtually by an instructor in the program.

SETTING THE STAGE

Instructor supervision and support of distance students' practicum experiences poses multiple challenges for online university programs (Simpson, 2006). On-campus teacher education programs typically include a practica where students collaborate with a teacher or expert in their practice while simultaneously mentored by an instructor in the program. Regular meetings between these three stakeholders (the student, the collaborator in their practice, and the instructor in the program) provide opportunities for updates, support, and advice. Face-to-face programs or courses that involve field experiences also consist of regular on-campus student meetings in order for them to share experiences, discuss issues and plan together. In the online environment, however, it is difficult to organize or replicate the face-to-face interactions that occur between the three stakeholders. Likewise, coordinating a

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