

High Impact Teaching Practice: Collaborative Learning

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In your own words, briefly describe some of the characteristics of collaborative learning. What does your collaborative learning look like in your course? *[Describe the course and assignment. How did collaborative learning contribute to class material? What are some examples of collaborative learning activities?]*

To me, **collaborative learning** is about allowing students to work together towards solving a problem, completing a task, or creating a product. Along the way, students brainstorm and tap into each others' strengths and skills.

COMM 3480 is a course that delves into ways to leverage the various media platforms we have available to develop and implement successful health communication campaigns. The course is structured in two parts -- theory and practical application. While in the theoretical part students learn about the most common theoretical frameworks guiding health communication campaigns, in the practical application part they are expected to actually develop one such campaign. In the past, the campaign project was an individual one, but as part of the HITP grant, I converted it to a collaborative project – students worked on their campaign in groups of 3. Groups were responsible for developing a health communication campaign on a topic of their choosing, submit a written campaign plan and a corresponding PowerPoint presentation.

The reason for this conversion has to do with how this kind of work (designing and implementing health communication campaigns) is routinely performed in the "real world" -- i.e., in teams of people brainstorming ideas for the campaign development and implementation.

How did you manage the collaborative activities and a project? *[How did you divide students into teams? How involved were you in the activities and project? How can you evaluate teamwork?]*

Students were assigned to groups of 3 by me, completely arbitrarily. For each group, I created a collaborative workspace within the course – specifically, I created a separate section in the course shell on Blackboard, where each individual group had access to each other's **email** for easy communication, and a **file exchange** function for easy transfer of information relevant to the final project. They also had access to a progress report dropbox, as students were asked to submit four such reports throughout the semester. These reports kept them on task and moving towards the final project at a steady pace, while also providing them the opportunity to receive feedback from me early on.

After putting these resources together for each group, my involvement was fairly minimal. Other than providing feedback on the four progress reports, I left it to the students to divide the work as they saw fit, and find ways to contribute to the project in fairly equal proportion. At the conclusion of the project, each student filled out a peer evaluation form, in which they were asked to rate their own, as well as every other group member's contribution with regard to several components of the final campaign project. They were also asked to evaluate themselves and the other group members on *professionalism* and *collaboration*.

What are some general strategies to keep in mind when incorporating collaborative learning into a course?

Since the HITP grant was about incorporating collaborative learning into an *online* course, I will stick to that in my response. I think that generally, there are some unique challenges to assigning a collaborative project in online courses. First, students' ability to work together on a project can be limited, because they are often geographically dispersed and/or their schedules and other life commitments are incompatible. Second, it can be easy to shirk one's responsibilities when working with a group of people one has never met. Third, students often have to communicate via asynchronous means like e-mail, which can lead to some misunderstandings.

That said, when it comes to online courses, I think there are some general strategies that can help things move along smoothly. First, I think it is important that each group is provided with a collaborative workspace within the online course. That is, each group has a dedicated section in the LMS, whatever that may be, where members have easy access to each other and group-relevant resources. Second, it is often helpful that students are provided with tools (e-mail, file exchange, blog, etc.) and instructions to facilitate online communication. Lastly, it is also a good idea to have some sort of back-up communication channels or procedures in place, in case of technology failures. Uncommon, but consequential, when they do occur.

What was your biggest challenge in this experience?

Related to the above, going into this I specifically feared that the sense of accountability towards other team members may be diminished, given that my students didn't get a chance to build rapport in a FtF setting. I also feared that communicating mostly via e-mail would limit students' ability to understand someone else's personality or the tone they are using to communicate. While these fears were for the most part unfounded, there was one group that had some difficulty coordinating throughout the project. One member seemed to indeed shirk her responsibility and placing a heavier burden on the rest of the group, while another came across differently from how she had intended in her email communication because of cultural differences. The challenging part for me was to determine the extent to which I should intervene and mitigate these problems.

What did you gain from the teaching experience?

I think most importantly a sense of confidence that I can incorporate certain collaborative activities in online courses, that I thought were best suited for the traditional classroom. Some tweaks are necessary, but I enjoyed thinking and brainstorming creatively with Jackie Crouch about putting together the group project requirements and instructions.

What did students gain from the teaching experience?

Well, I hoped that by making the campaign project a collaborative endeavor, students would hone some skills that will most certainly be expected of them should they pursue a career path as a health communicator -- (1) learning to work and problem solve by brainstorming with others, and (2) improving one's own understanding by way of listening to and considering others' insights and perspectives.

Formal course feedback (via FCQs) is not available yet, but from the peer evaluations students submitted at the end of the health campaign project, I gather that they really enjoyed collaborating with their classmates and they felt that the final project was stronger as a result of that collaboration.