

Collaborative Online Learning

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Abstract

Online learning no longer follows a quasi-permanent absence of group learning. Online learning has become a very collaborative and social experience for many students. It is no longer considered independent study. This paper explores the current tools used for collaboration and communication in online learning, as well as debunks the long standing myth that online learning is simply an independent study due to the quasi-permanent absence of group learning. Quality assurance policies have been put in place to ensure that online learning is not strictly an independent study. This paper will highlight some of the quality assurance measures that promote the presence of collaboration in the online classroom environment.

Keywords: online learning, distance learning, collaboration, independent study, distance learning myths, quality assurance

Collaborative Online Learning

One of the main myths surrounding online learning is that online courses are for anti-social people. People take online courses for a variety of reasons and not liking people tends to not be among those reasons. In 1996, Desmond Keegan offered a formal definition of distance education. In his definition, he stated that distance education is “the quasi-permanent absence of the learning group throughout the length of the learning process so that people are usually taught as individuals rather than in groups.” (Shelton & Saltsman, 2005, p. 3) This could not be further from the present truth. This paper will show how online learning has changed from that statement in the 1996 definition of distance education and how online learning can be even more productive and engaging than face to face learning in many instances.

A Brief History of Online Learning

Online learning only dates back to the 1960’s with the creation of PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations). The University of Illinois scientists created a classroom system using linked computer terminals. These terminals allowed students to access informational resources while listening to a professor who was lecturing remotely, via some form of television or audio device. By the mid-1980’s, college resources often included online access to course information and student networking tools (Smarty, 2010). It was also during the 1980s that the personal computer era began with the Macintosh. This enabled online communities to begin sharing information, slowly paving the way forward for online learning.

However, it was not until the creation of the Internet and its widespread adoption in the 1990s that really advanced the field of online learning. By the mid-1990s, the World Wide Web was founded and created an infinite amount of possibilities when it comes to online learning. This created another chapter in the history of online learning. The face of distance learning

changed drastically as online learning experienced rapid growth. It was during this decade that email communication took off. The dawn of a new era in online learning surfaced where virtual learning environments took shape and online learning or eLearning became a widely recognized term (Gogos, 2013).

Early computer-based distance education used proprietary learning software and electronic bulletin boards that students could dial into and leave messages for their instructor or classmates. This way of learning was not very interactive and did seem like more of an independent study for online learning. The first major foray into computerized online education came in 1983 with the launch of the Electronic University Network (EUN). EUN enabled students to take online courses using proprietary software that ran on DOS and Commodore 64 computers. John Bear, author of numerous distance learning guides declared, "The grand opening of the Electronic University Network was one of the defining moments in online distance education." (Bear, 1999) Two years later Paul Levinson started Connected Education, which was described as "a not-for-profit corporation that offered graduate and undergraduate and graduate level courses in conjunction with The New School for Social Research and Polytechnic University." In such programs, a typical student logged into the central computer system at a convenient time, read the latest materials online or downloaded them for offline reading, then posted comments for others to respond to. Later, the instructor and other classmates followed the same sequence and posted their comments, with the result being an asynchronous discussion conducted through bulletin board postings. In 1987, the Electronic University Network was purchased and changed into a support organization assisting colleges and universities develop virtual campuses. By 1992, EUN hosted numerous virtual campuses and online degree programs,

including a Ph.D. in Integral Studies from the California Institute of Integral Studies, on America Online (Baker, 1999).

During the 1990s, the focus on online learning was centered around convenience more than learning. Promotional materials declared that students could participate in programs no matter where they lived, even if it was across the world. Duke University declared that “students can work and live anywhere in the world while participating in the Global Executive MBA program”. Even though student interaction was not dismissed or minimized with these statements, these promotional strategies suggested that student interaction was not a high priority at the time. (Baker, 1999)

Learning management systems began being used at the end of the 1990s. Some universities started to design and develop their own versions of learning management systems, but most educational institutions started with systems that were already developed and available on the market. One such system was the American company Blackboard. Blackboard was a complete solution of the management of online courses allowing students and teachers to exchange learning materials, take tests, communicate with each other in many different ways - such as via a discussion board or via system based email. Teachers were also able to trace and track the progress of their students by being able to view site statistics based on the individual students, day and even the time of day they accessed the system. This type of environment facilitated learning in quite an easy way since there was not much of a learning curve on behalf of the teachers or the students.

The invention of Blackboard and other learning management systems was the catalyst that online learning needed in order to be successful and expand. It was after the invention and adoption of Blackboard by many individual schools that online learning really took off and

created a competitive market for educational technology as well as for universities across the world.

Myth – You are on your own when you take an online course.

Online learning has allowed many people in the world to gain additional education and even multiple degrees. Online learning has helped to define the concept of individualized learning by allowing access to a wealth of information via college courses and general informational courses to adults everywhere. Online learning has become commonplace. About 5.3 million United States students took at least one online course in Fall of 2013 (Williams, 2015).

A major myth that circulates about online learning is that students are on their own when they take an online class. This myth does seem like it has many examples to back it up. After all, it is just a student and their computer. It is hard to imagine that a course that is taken from the comfort of one's home can offer an environment with social and collaborative engagement. However, it is possible, especially today. Many online courses can even be more interactive than traditional face to face courses. How is this possible? Communication in the digital age is what makes this possible. Applications such as instant messaging, video chatting, and even online gaming, and learning management systems cater to synchronous and asynchronous learning.

In an online course, learners are given the opportunity to research their answers and think before they post these answers. They are also given the opportunity to edit their answers even after submitting their original answers. This eliminates the awkwardness of shouting out the wrong answer in class and provides ample opportunity for a well rounded answer. The extra time and space allows students to provide a more reasoned and researched response.

Equal Opportunity Learning

Language barriers are broken down because it is easier to understand typed text than it is to understand a student with a thick accent from their native country. Online communication also provides foreign students or even shy students with a better opportunity to speak and contribute to the learning environment by removing these language barriers and providing a more comfortable environment for students who may feel nervous or shy to speak up in a classroom. The online learning environment provides more leeway for students to open up and express themselves in a more articulate way, allowing them the chance to state their contribution just the way they wanted to (White, n.d.).

If online learning programs follow the Quality Assurance benchmarks for success in Internet-based distance education, then they will have a required discussion component that is part of the course grade. This collaboration ensures that no student is on their own when taking an online course. The purpose of these discussions is not only to create open communication and collaboration, but they also contribute to the learning process. The discussion aspect also allows students to get to know one another and allows shy students and those with language barrier issues to participate as well. In this type of environment, students do not have to wait to be called on, they are not pressed for time to present their argument or contribution, and discussion can continue for as long as is necessary and not be disrupted by the clock showing that the end of class has come and the discussion must end.

Instructors feel that they know their online students more than their face to face students. Many students feel that they are more connected to their instructors in an online environment versus a traditional face to face environment as well. Face to face courses oftentimes only meet once or twice a week. Online courses are always there. Many instructors log in daily to check

for any questions from students, make sure there are not any problems with the assignments or other things related to the course, and usually respond back quickly to the students. Many instructors even have specific online office hours strictly for their online students.

Critical Factor - Course Design

Course design is a critical factor in determining the quantity, quality, and type of interactivity in regards to learner interaction with content, instructors, and other students. Instructor skill in creating a collaborative and social course is a crucial aspect of successful learning in an online environment. Quality course design and learning environments include many opportunities for students to engage in interactive and collaborative activities with their peers. A well designed online course will give students access to a rich learning environment that provides opportunity for interaction and social engagement.

Quality learning environments not only provide the interaction and social aspect of learning, but they also have been shown to contribute to better learning outcomes: including development of higher order thinking skills, co-creation of knowledge and meaning, reflection, and transformative learning (Paloff & Pratt, 2005). Different learning styles and cultures can be accommodated more easily because of effective collaborate learning. Effective collaborative learning values diversity. Also, skills gained from the collaborative learning experience are highly transferable to team-based work environments.

The sole existence of communication and collaboration is not sufficient to improve student learning. The communication and collaboration employed must have a clear purpose and facilitate content delivery.

Building Community

Students' sense of isolation is often cited as one of the reasons for low retention rates in online classes. One way to combat this is to build group work into online classes. By doing so, this will most likely also improve retention and increase student learning. When built properly, group projects require students to use higher-level critical-thinking and problem-solving skills. Students may be randomly assigned to groups or assigned based upon their interests, their skill levels, their learning style, or their participation levels.

Assigning students to groups based on a common interest is a great way to have students tackle controversial issues. To group students with common interests the instructor could provide a list of topics and have the students sign up electronically or through email for the topic they wish to discuss. To encourage critical thinking, the instructor could assign students to take the opposite position on the topic. Giving students a technology skills assessment and grouping them by similar skills for group work is a great way to lessen the intimidation many students feel when their skill level is not as high as that of their classmates, especially older students.

Grouping students by learning style is a great way of giving students the opportunity to develop projects that best fit specific styles. For instance, in a nutrition class the instructor could have a group of kinesthetic learners develop a web page on one of the vitamins, have a group of auditory students develop and record a jingle about one of the vitamins, and have a third group of visual learners write a paper or create a flyer for one of the vitamins. In addition to these methods of creating groups, instructors can use data provided by their learning management system to group students (Humbert, n.d.).

Technology

Technology enhanced online courses have proven to be more empowering than face-to-face courses. Online courses can accommodate the unique needs of individual learners. One size does not fit all when it comes to creative effective online learning environments.

Personalization. Not only are learners diverse in obvious ways such as age, background, and lifestyle, but they also come with diverse experiences, skills, and learning preferences. Carefully choosing the best technology to integrate into online courses can enable personalization. Activities and materials can be personalized to optimize individual learning styles.

Interactivity. By taking advantage of the interactive technologies we use in our everyday lives, we can create collaborative virtual environments and communities that make it easier for us to acquire relevant knowledge and reinforce valuable career skills. Online seminars, such as webinars connect learners with recognized experts in their fields. Podcasting and video conferencing can do the same. Social networking platforms also provide an environment and opportunity for interactivity in an online course.

Engagement. Well-designed virtual learning environments offer unprecedented opportunities for us to learn by doing under real-world, real-time conditions. Successful football players do not learn how to run a touchdown by reading a book or listening to a lecture. They learn by doing it repeatedly, under various field conditions and against many different adversaries, with plenty of feedback from coaches and teammates alike. The same goes for any aspiring professional, which is why we value so-called “authentic” learning experiences like apprenticeships and internships (Aldridge, 2013).

Tools for Collaboration



collaborative suites



wikis wikia

PBWORKS



Real-Time Communications



Campfire™



mindmeister

bubbl.us Concept Mapping



(Deal, 2009)

Quality Assurance

The National Education Association (NEA) and Blackboard, Inc., a widely used platform provider for online education jointly commissioned the Institute for Higher Education Policy to examine quality assurance benchmarks that several different organizations have developed to ensure quality distance education. These benchmarks are designed to apply to a wide variety of institutional contexts and consist of fairly broad statements. These benchmarks are examined by studying active distance learning programs at several different institutions that offer online learning.

A three phased case study was performed. There were six institutions participating in the study: Brevard Community College, Regents College, the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the University of Maryland University College, Utah State University, and Weber State University. In the end, a set of 24 quality assurance benchmarks was developed to ensure quality in Internet-based distance education. The purpose of these benchmarks is to assist policymakers, such as college and university presidents and chief academic officers, state coordinating boards, accrediting bodies, state legislatures, and governors' offices, as well as faculty and students, in making reasonable and well informed judgments with regard to the quality of Internet-based distance education. These benchmarks also provide a measure of how well courses are designed and interactivity is implemented between students and faculty. The fifth edition of the rubric has been updated to include 43 benchmarks.

Included in these 43 benchmarks are standards that include student interaction and collaborative tools, such as standard 1.9, "Learners are asked to introduce themselves to the class." Standard 5.2 states "Learning activities provide opportunities for interaction that support active learning." Standard 5.4 provides that "the requirements for learner interaction are clearly

stated”, and standard 6.2 incorporates technology that promotes learner engagement and active learning. While these do not explicitly state student interaction with other students, previous versions do and these are updated from that version. The standards from the Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric, Fifth Edition are shown below.

QUALITY MATTERS



Standards from the QM Higher Education Rubric, Fifth Edition

For more information or access to the full QM Rubric visit www.qualitymatters.org or email info@qualitymatters.org



Standards	Points	
Course Overview Introduction	1.1 Instructions make clear how to get started and where to find various course components.	3
	1.2 Learners are introduced to the purpose and structure of the course.	3
	1.3 Etiquette expectations (sometimes called “netiquette”) for online discussions, email, and other forms of communication are clearly stated.	2
	1.4 Course and/or institutional policies with which the learner is expected to comply are clearly stated, or a link to current policies is provided.	2
	1.5 Minimum technology requirements are clearly stated and instructions for use provided.	2
	1.6 Prerequisite knowledge in the discipline and/or any required competencies are clearly stated.	1
	1.7 Minimum technical skills expected of the learner are clearly stated.	1
	1.8 The self-introduction by the instructor is appropriate and is available online.	1
	1.9 Learners are asked to introduce themselves to the class.	1
Learning Objectives (Competencies)	2.1 The course learning objectives, or course/program competencies, describe outcomes that are measurable.	3
	2.2 The module/unit learning objectives or competencies describe outcomes that are measurable and consistent with the course-level objectives or competencies.	3
	2.3 All learning objectives or competencies are stated clearly and written from the learner’s perspective.	3
	2.4 The relationship between learning objectives or competencies and course activities is clearly stated.	3
	2.5 The learning objectives or competencies are suited to the level of the course.	3
Assessment and Measurement	3.1 The assessments measure the stated learning objectives or competencies.	3
	3.2 The course grading policy is stated clearly.	3
	3.3 Specific and descriptive criteria are provided for the evaluation of learners’ work and are tied to the course grading policy.	3
	3.4 The assessment instruments selected are sequenced, varied, and suited to the learner work being assessed.	2
	3.5 The course provides learners with multiple opportunities to track their learning progress.	2
Instructional Materials	4.1 The instructional materials contribute to the achievement of the stated course and module/unit learning objectives or competencies.	3
	4.2 Both the purpose of instructional materials and how the materials are to be used for learning activities are clearly explained.	3
	4.3 All instructional materials used in the course are appropriately cited.	2
	4.4 The instructional materials are current.	2
	4.5 A variety of instructional materials is used in the course.	2
	4.6 The distinction between required and optional materials is clearly explained.	1
Course Activities and Learner Interaction	5.1 The learning activities promote the achievement of the stated learning objectives or competencies.	3
	5.2 Learning activities provide opportunities for interaction that support active learning.	3
	5.3 The instructor’s plan for classroom response time and feedback on assignments is clearly stated.	3
	5.4 The requirements for learner interaction are clearly stated.	2
Course Technology	6.1 The tools used in the course support the learning objectives and competencies.	3
	6.2 Course tools promote learner engagement and active learning.	3
	6.3 Technologies required in the course are readily obtainable.	2
	6.4 The course technologies are current.	1
	6.5 Links are provided to privacy policies for all external tools required in the course.	1
Learner Support	7.1 The course instructions articulate or link to a clear description of the technical support offered and how to obtain it.	3
	7.2 Course instructions articulate or link to the institution’s accessibility policies and services.	3
	7.3 Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution’s academic support services and resources can help learners succeed in the course and how learners can obtain them.	2
	7.4 Course instructions articulate or link to an explanation of how the institution’s student services and resources can help learners succeed and how learners can obtain them.	1
Accessibility and Usability*	8.1 Course navigation facilitates ease of use.	3
	8.2 Information is provided about the accessibility of all technologies required in the course.	3
	8.3 The course provides alternative means of access to course materials in formats that meet the needs of diverse learners.	2
	8.4 The course design facilitates readability.	2
	8.5 Course multimedia facilitate ease of use.	2

* Meeting QM’s accessibility Standards does not guarantee or imply that specific country/federal/state/local accessibility regulations are met. Consult with an accessibility specialist to ensure that accessibility regulations are met.

Conclusion

In the recent history of online learning, asynchronous communication tools such as discussion boards, wikis, collaborative suites, podcasting, video conferencing, instant messaging, real time communication, and YouTube appear to be some the most significant resources employed to promote student interaction. Course design is extremely critical to the potential for increased student interaction through online education. Since many online programs used Web-based discussion boards, there are semester-long archives of student interaction. These discussion boards provide a place for every learner to contribute, even the uncomfortable, shy learners and those who may have issues with language barriers. This method of contribution and interaction among students allows the students to properly formulate their answers. There are no time limits at the end of the day which allows the discussion to continue and run its course. In an online course, learners are given the opportunity to research their answers and think before they post these answers. They are also given the opportunity to edit their answers. This eliminates the awkwardness of shouting out the wrong answer in class and provides ample opportunity for a well rounded answer. The extra time and space allows students to provide a more reasoned and researched response.

These tools, combined with the current 43 quality assurance benchmarks set by the Quality Matters organization, ensure that online learning is developed and deployed to include student interaction. This student interaction engages all students and faculty and sets up ample opportunity for quality learning. Gone are the days of online learning being looked at as easy courses with no student or teacher interaction, giving the impression that they are independent studies with a quasi-absence of group learning. Online learning now incorporates many ways of inclusion, creating a more intimate and collaborative environment.

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