Using Groups Online to Build Community

Including collaborative activities in online classes can help to foster the development community with students working for the common good.

Many instructors choose to incorporate group activities in their classes with the goals of helping students to develop a higher level of understanding about the content to of the course and helping students to develop collaboration skills. For students in online classes, groups can additionally help to prevent the feeling of isolation that some online students report. While these are important goals, especially for teachers of pre-service teachers, the response from students is often less than enthusiastic.

Students give a number of reasons for not wanting to participate in group projects. In some cases it is difficult for group members to find times that are convenient for all group members to meet to discuss and work on the project. Sometimes there will be a group member who dominates the conversation during group meetings. Students frequently complain about having group member members who do not complete their component of the group’s task. Another reason is the variation among group members in their commitment to completing the project in the best possible way so that everyone receives a high grade for the project. The number one reason given by many students for wanting to avoid group activities is the inequity of having group members who did not work on the project receive the same grade as those who do.

Collaborative activities in online classes can foster development of community and provide a more global experience for students in rural areas (Steinweg, Davis, Thomson, 2005). A structured format allowing for self and group evaluation encourages participation. Palloff and Pratt (2005) provide a number of suggestions for structuring group activities to increase student interaction and establish working relationships for online groups.

Including collaborative activities in online classes can help to foster the development of community with students working for the common good. Viewing student reflections on an assigned group activity might allow the instructor to get a glimpse of the success of current work products. Additionally, questionnaires submitted at the end of the project paired with final reflections enable the researcher to determine the student-perceived effectiveness of establishing online groups. This poster will present data from questionnaires and reflections completed at the end of a structured group activity in a series of online classes.

