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ONLINE COLLABORATION

CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

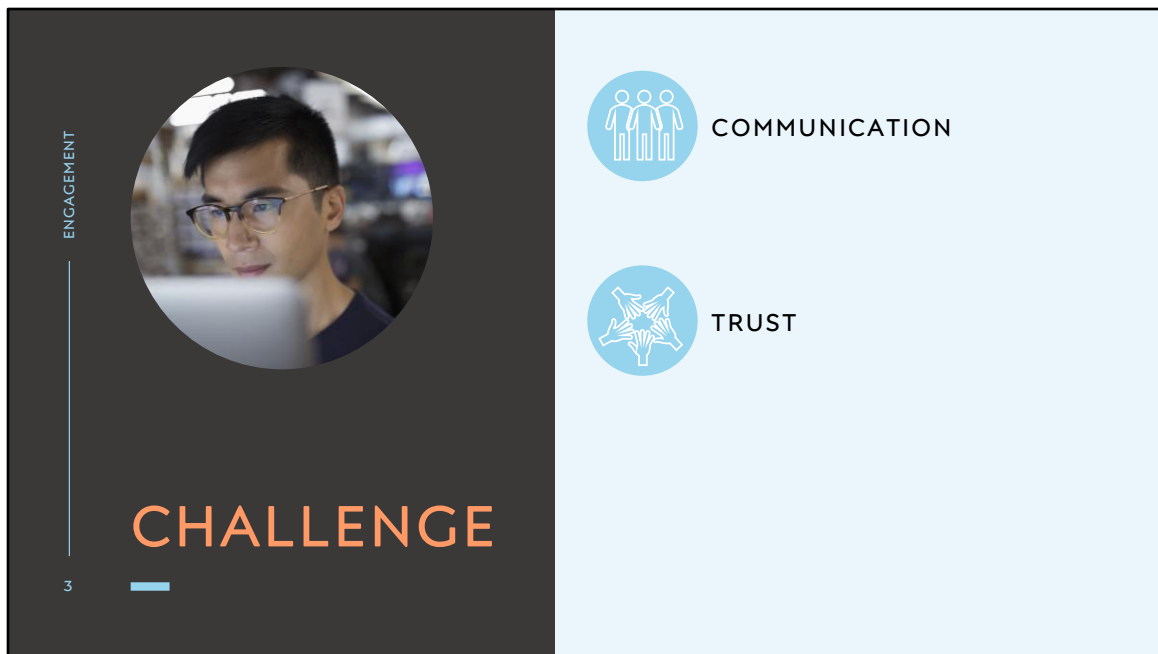
Whether we like to admit it or not, human beings are social creatures. According to Oosterhof (2008), our interactions with each other are invaluable learning opportunities that help us develop problem solving, critical thinking skills, productivity, and confidence. That is why collaboration in the classroom is so critical. However, group activities in a virtual setting can be challenging. It can be difficult maintaining engagement with anonymous peers whose faces we can't always see. Moreover, instructors face the additional hurdle of evaluating the work produced by groups in an online setting. How do they know if everyone contributed equally? How do they grade fairly and accurately?

Today, we will be looking at these challenges that exist in online collaboration, and we'll identify strategies and models we can use to overcome them.

Tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn. – Benjamin Franklin

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If students are to effectively collaborate online, they must be appropriately engaged and involved - in both the learning material, and with their peers. Engagement in the online community is born out of a learner's communication with their peers, and their trust of their learning community (Oosterhof et al, 2008). Communication begins with interaction, which is one of the initial challenges faced by students who enter the online learning environment almost anonymously. In fact, they may be even unfamiliar with the technology they must use to send a message to a peer or share work. If this is the case, how can students create trusting, working relationships with each other? Establishing trust in the online environment is critical to collaboration. How do learners work together if they don't know each other or trust each other? If they struggle to communicate, how might they find common goals and interests, necessary for helping each other achieve in the classroom setting?



One solution to these challenges lies in the Phases of Engagement Framework outlined by Palloff and Pratt in 2005, as explored by Oosterhof. This model provides four key components instructors can use to help students stay engaged and communicating through the online learning environment.

First, the instructor will provide the students the opportunity to engage with each other in Ice Breaker Activities, wherein the learners will introduce themselves, and participate in discussions about relevant topics impacting everyone in their community (Oosterhof et al, 2008). The instructor may take this time to help learners acclimate to the technology that will be used throughout the course to interact.

The Phases of Engagement model gradually builds up to collaboration in groups. It begins with learners completing one activity as partners, wherein they reflect on a topic together. Next, they work in a small group to solve and reflect on a problem. Finally, learners take the lead to orchestrate a group assignment. They may create a project or a presentation, or even design their own activities (Oosterhof et al, 2008).

"A thorough assessment should include an evaluation of the learner's individual contributions to the generation of knowledge and skills acquired from the group's interaction" (Oosterhof et al, 2008, pp 215, para 1)

ASSESSMENT

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Assessing the efforts and achievements of groups in an online setting presents another challenge for instructors. As groups form and begin to steer activities on their own, the instructor takes on a more passive role as they flit amongst the different factions to observe (Oosterhof et al, 2008). They are unable to witness each interaction and group dynamic, making it impossible to get an accurate picture of the individual contributions of each group member. They are unaware of the unseen communication that occurs through text messages and emails, and can only speculate about how each group member demonstrates accountability. It may be too daunting a task for instructors to keep up with every forum post created by group members that might reveal some level of meaningful contribution (Oosterhof et al, 2008).

Without insight into how the group is performing, it becomes difficult for an instructor to determine the overall effectiveness of the group activity, and whether the individuals in the group have achieved instructional goals of the course. Even if the group achieves a satisfactory grade, how will an instructor know that grade reflects the efforts of each group member? Was the final project spearheaded by one or two group members while the others remained inactive?

Because an individual's performance in online collaboration involves several different aspects, an instructor will need to evaluate it several different ways (Oosterhof et al, 2008). The challenges lies in figuring out how to structure the assessment such that the instructor can assess observable group achievements and interactions, and the group members can reflect on their own experiences with online collaboration. Communication and clear expectations will be key for navigating the rocky pitfalls of peer assessment, an endeavor that must be treated with emotional intelligence to be worth the effort (Oosterhof et al, 2008).



One way instructors can assess online interactions between group members is a software solution that tracks trends and patterns in forums. Software like Discussion Analysis Tool (DAT) and ForumManager can provide instructors with a report that breaks down an individual's activity within a discussion forum – right down the amount of effort that has been included in discussion posts. Using software solutions to monitor forums helps instructors stay engaged in group activities, provide targeted feedback to keep the group on the right path, and determine which group members are contributing (Oosterhof et al, 2008).

There are several ways instructors and learners can determine reliability and effectiveness in online collaboration. First, learners can perform self-assessments throughout the experience to check their progress and keep themselves accountable for participation. They can reaffirm that the material is being learned and retained through knowledge checks, which should indicate if the collaboration activity is helping them achieve their learning goals. They can also rate their individual participation and contributions to the group through a survey, as well as the participation and contributions of their peers. When an instructor reviews these peer assessments, they will get a better understanding of how the group is behaving and performing (Oosterhof et al, 2008).

One way to effectively develop learners who are dedicated to collaborative learning, ready to participate, and ready to hold their peers accountable to participation, is to involve them in the creation of assessments. The team may work with the instructor to decide how and when the group members will be assessed, or they may establish amongst themselves their own criteria , with each member in agreement (Oosterhof et al, 2008). If the team feels confident in what is expected of them and is aware of the standards by which their actions are held, they may feel more confident holding their peers to those standards. A learner's confidence within their own community will increase the reliability of self and peer assessments. Creating these assessment instruments will provide structure for learners as they evaluate their own learning experience and shed light on their collaborative activities for their instructor's assessment purposes.

REFERENCES

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Oosterhof, A., Conrad, R., & Ely, D. (2008). Assessing learners online. Pearson Education, Inc. [University of Arizona Global Campus: Assessing Learners Online VitalSource eBook for Ashford University, 1/e](#)