

# Online Collaborative Learning and Leadership Development

**Tony W. Day**

*University of Phoenix, USA*

## INTRODUCTION

Learner interactions in the traditional classroom setting fail to develop leadership skills (Felser, 2005). Interactions occur in four ways: 1) between the student and the instructor; 2) collaborative interaction of the students; 3) interactions with the curriculum; and 4) with technology in the online setting (Jung, Choi, Lim, & Leem, 2002). Whether or not these interactions occur effectively can affect the success of the online learning process. Successful interactions facilitate the fostering of advanced learner proficiency in analyzing information and creating innovative means of interpretation. This process augments critical thinking skills that cultivate leadership potential (Billings & Kowalski, 2005).

Many of the pioneers of the Internet and human-computer interaction foresaw the need to employ the Internet as a means of distance education. Just as once the correspondence course represented the meaning of distance education, the Web will become the major source of distance education for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Over 80% of all classrooms and 98% of all libraries in the United States are now linked to the Internet and therefore, the world (Long & Long, 2004).

The next generation of knowledge transfer occurs through a constructivist approach that manages the process through experiential learning, which focuses on collaborative interaction of the learners and reflection on the process in order to develop the desired learning (Beckett, 2001). This approach also develops higher-order thinking skills that are linked to leadership development (Billings & Kowalski, 2005). Since the public community college offers over 90% of all distance-education courses and now represents over 48% of enrollments in distance education across academic institutions (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004), the institution must align the purpose of distance education and education in general. This alignment, along with adequate student supports offered to facilitate

the success of online learners, becomes the focus of understanding for administrators and faculty alike.

Successful collaborative online interactions facilitate the fostering of advanced learner proficiency in analyzing information and creating innovative means of interpretation (Jung et al., 2002; Moore, 1972). This process augments critical thinking skills that cultivate leadership potential (Billings & Kowalski, 2005). When the individual utilizes his or her learning style effectively, a greater level of retention of information is attained (Cohen, 2001). Interaction between online learners builds capacity, which Buck (2003) found increases internal and external leadership skills. Development of leadership skills takes place through the interactions of the online learners who work collaboratively towards a common goal (Chen, 2005). Experience in developing leadership on the part of the faculty member can also increase the capability of the learner to find inspiration in the online learning context (Howell, Saba, Lindsay, & Williams, 2004).

The increase in the use of online educational programming for higher-education coursework (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2004) necessitates the need for examining the online collaborative interactional process as it applies to leadership development. Research into online collaborative learning interactions have highlighted the development of skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, higher retention, capacity, goal setting, interpretation, analysis, and evaluative processes, which are all part of the successful leader's competencies (Buck, 2003; Burbach, Matkin, & Fritz, 2004; Chen, 2005; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Risher & Stopper, 2003).

## BACKGROUND

Collaborative learning has long been associated with improved learning in adults (Bruffee, 1999) and with leadership development (Jenlink, 2004; Lewin, Lip-

pitt, & White, 1939; Scout Association of the United Kingdom, 2003; Wren, 2004). Collaborative learning enables transition from traditional instructor-centered learning to differentiated learning (Brimijoin, 2005; Tomlinson, 2003). The classroom instructor becomes a facilitator rather than a director of the learning process (Taylor, DeGuerre, Gavin, & Kass, 2002). When students use the collaborative-learning aspects of online instruction, each individual can develop a more cohesive approach and overcome greater challenges through pooled resources (Borthick, Jones, & Wakai, 2003). These online learning communities exemplify each member's shared role and involvement in the learning process (Gordon, 2004) through assisting each member's ability to overcome factors of time and distance and effective integration of each member's participation (Frankola, 2001).

The electronic communications process also lowers the inhibitions between individuals of differing social backgrounds by eliminating the social cues that would inhibit traditional face-to-face communication. Electronic communications via e-mail and instant messaging allow for carefully developed statements and responses, and relieves the pressure to respond immediately. In personal conversation, time-lapses are rude; however, within the electronic culture these breaks, even in instant messages, are acceptable. Effective electronic communications should involve the development of each person's ability to "listen" online. Individuals produce better responses in a less stressful timeframe. Online learning utilizes a number of different learning modes of presentation that enhances the level of retention in this manner for the learner.

Resistance to technology arises when the technological interface is faulty; familiarity with technology is limited, or the perception of the online participants are that the experience will not fully meet their learning needs (Allen, Bourhis, Burrell, & Mabry, 2002). Analysis of Internet communications studies found that resistance with electronic communications centered around three factors. First, participants with limited experience in the computer-mediated environment tend to utilize less fully the available technological resources. Second, limited online involvement appears related to the type of media encountered, though "e-mail showed no communication apprehension" (Czubaj, 2002, p. 339). Finally, gender played a significant role in the communication process in online discussions or electronic interactions, due to the attitude of most females

to view the computer as a tool for work rather than leisure (Czubaj, 2004). Many of the concerns center on technology, and its acceptance will have less and less influence, as the next generation of technology-literate students emerge ready to participate in online learning coursework (Peterson & Bond, 2004; Weller, Pegler, & Mason, 2005).

Research in collaborative learning has found that the more experienced members of the online learning community, whether faculty member or another learner, can assist those who are less capable online. This research reveals the concept of social constructionism in that it develops meaning through social interactions online. The development of the concept and utilization of transactional distance and its interactions to understand how learning occurs online helps faculty and administrators to better understand what supports need to be put in place to assist online learners to succeed (Jung et al., 2002; Moore, 1972, 2001). The experience of the faculty in delivering the online course itself enhances their successful implementation of online objectives (Marsh & Willis, 2003; Neuhauser, 2002). The most important factor for faculty to engage in creating online instruction is the availability of training and support programs for the professional development of distance educators (Clay, 1999).

## **MAIN FOCUS: ANALYSIS OF COLLABORATIVE LEARNING**

The significance of this study to leadership is that it opens the way for proposing that successful leadership development and enhancement of existing leadership practices can be improved or developed via the online collaborative learning environment. Prior conceptions that leadership can only be developed via face-to-face interactions can be challenged. Leadership practices have expanded beyond the traditional classroom, corporate, or community meeting setting. Extensive use of the Internet and other electronic communications is an aspect of the current leader's repertoire of skills for mastery. Lines of communications between companies, parents and teachers, students and instructors are all becoming more and more electronically viable. Tomorrow's leaders must possess this level of interaction as a leadership skill.

Although the effectiveness of learning through online collaborative interactions has been well estab-



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