

Chapter IV

Group Method: Virtual Teams and Communities

At this time, group or team learning is probably the clearest pedagogical approach to distance learning in the research literature. With a strong basis in learning theory, time and again those practicing and writing about distance learning have focused on learning through teams and discussed the dynamics of communication among students and faculty that occurs when this approach is taken. In this chapter, I examine the nature of community in traditional higher education, the research literature on virtual teams, and lessons learned in business in relationship to virtual teams applicable to distance learning.

The 2000 survey showed that most distance learning administrators (32.0% “strongly agree,” and 52.1% “agree”) distance learning administrators state that their courses offer an opportunity to collaborate with other students on projects.

Figure 8: Collaboration Among Students on Projects (Question 42)

Courses offer opportunity to collaborate with other students on projects.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	strongly agree	54	30.7	32.0	32.0
	agree	88	50.0	52.1	84.0
	disagree	22	12.5	13.0	97.0
	strongly disagree	5	2.8	3.0	100.0
	Total	169	96.0	100.0	
Missing	System	7	4.0		
Total		176	100.0		

In the interviews with administrators from the 2000 study, student collaboration was identified by many administrators as important. In the following interview, the administrator points out the difference between online and traditional correspondence courses as centering on the ability to collaborate.

That is imperative. Most of the faculty require in online courses threaded discussions and/or chat rooms, and require that kind of participation. That is built into the software package we use. Correspondence courses [have] probably very little student-to-student interaction. So if that's a big part of a faculty member's pedagogy, then we can't develop those [correspondence] courses. And I'd say most of our correspondence courses are conducive to the isolated student working by themselves (John Burgeson, Dean, Center for Continuing Studies, St. Cloud State University).

Indeed, some respondents claim that a stronger sense of community is developed in distance learning courses than in traditional courses.

Yes, if you talk to the students they tell you that this is more so than in traditional classrooms (Vice-President, anonymous large, independent, Eastern U. S. doctoral degree-granting institution).

Respondents spoke about techniques they use to form communities through various types of personal communication. One common way of personalizing the online experience is to have students post introductions and photos of themselves online.

Yeah, it's one of the things I've worked hard at. Some of the things are small, but if you don't do it, you're not as good as if you do do it. That each student has a picture of themselves online, so that people can know what they physically look like. That each student has a short bio[graphy] of themselves online. The way that we have traditionally used that first hour of class, you know, "tell me one thing about yourself that no one else knows." Here you get beyond that, how many kids you have, what you do for a living, things that get beyond your bio[graphy]. But here you have a picture of yourself and a bio[graphy], and you can read it at will, not just the first hour of the class, before you get to know them. They say, "Gary's an interesting guy. I'm going to look at his bio[graphy] again." People know a lot more about each other than they did before we had them do the online bios. Blackboard has an area for this that they call their own

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