Learning Together in Community: Collaborating Online
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The online environment can be a lonely place. Students and faculty alike report feelings of isolation when working online. The benefits of taking an online class – the ability to connect any time and any place, from one’s bedroom in pajamas and bunny slippers or from a library or computer lab – can also be a detriment of sorts given that, for the most part, the people with whom one is interacting are represented by words on a screen.

Recent studies of the online learning environment have noted that involvement or “social presence,” better known as a feeling of community and connection among learners, has contributed positively to learning outcomes and learner satisfaction with online courses (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997; Kazmer, 2000; Murphy, Drahbeker, and Epps, 1998; Picciano, 2002; Tu and Corry, 2002). However, beyond concerns for learner satisfaction is the more important belief that collaboration enhances learning outcomes and reduces the potential for learner isolation that can occur in the online environment.

Learning together in community provides students with an opportunity to extend and deepen the learning experience, test out new ideas by bouncing them off others, and receive critical and constructive feedback from their peers. The likelihood of successful achievement of learning objectives and the achievement of course competencies increases through collaborative engagement in the online classroom.

Collaborative activity does not just happen, nor should it be an “add-on” to an online course. Instructors need to pave the way for collaboration through good planning and integration of online activity. The instructor needs to set the stage, as it were, for collaborative engagement by providing an explanation of the importance of collaborative work and providing guidelines...