

Collaborative or cooperative learning, where groups or pairs of learners work together toward a shared academic goal, is common practice in classroom teaching environments. Proponents argue that both approaches, closely related, have the potential to deliver improved levels of student engagement, information acquisition and retention, higher-level thinking skills, interpersonal and communication skills, and self-confidence¹.

By its very nature the online learning environment generates a number of challenges for collaborative or cooperative learning and teaching, particularly where students are operating autonomously, independently and often at a distance from each other. Indeed, despite claims to the contrary, much current distance e-learning fails to provide, support or achieve purposeful student collaboration, with collaborative or cooperative activities often confined to poorly populated and ill-structured discussion fora.

Recent articles by Maja Pivec and Olga Dziabenko have highlighted the role that structured game-based learning can play in supporting collaborative learning. This area is currently being explored within the European e-learning community through initiatives such as the UNI-GAME project. Similarly, recent action research conducted by CREATE as part of the Minerva-sponsored RAMIE project has examined the part that structured and scenario-based role-play activity can play in promoting collaboration and cooperation between geographically dispersed online learners. This recently completed project work also sought to demonstrate that, in some contexts, role-play, like forms of game-play, can support authentic learning and assessment within the online learning environment.

The RAMIE experience: The use of structured, scenario-based, role-play to develop mentoring skills in the online learning environment

CREATE's pilot work within the RAMIE project centered on an existent online course, 'Supporting Employee Development through Mentoring' delivered through the Suffolk Institute of Technology. This course is delivered wholly online, via a virtual learning environment (WebCT) with tutorial and technical support provided online, or via telephone if necessary. The course seeks to introduce learners to all aspects of the theory and practice of workplace mentoring and is targeted at adult learners who wish to develop mentoring skills for application within the workplace. During the duration of the RAMIE project 62 students from across the eastern region of the United Kingdom were enrolled on the course.

The first section of the mentoring course focuses on the theory of mentoring. Thereafter the course culminates in a final formal assessment task based around the experience of participating in a mentoring role-play exercise, again conducted wholly online. The role-play exercise is designed to provide learners with an authentic experience of mentoring and an opportunity to demonstrate and practice recently acquired theoretical knowledge and skills.

The online role-play is organised by allocating two students, both at a similar point of progress in the course, the roles of mentor and mentee for each other. The role-play activity is conducted anonymously via email, with participants working within prescribed roles and scenarios (names, age, workplace, position, issues and responsibilities). Students assume the role of either a recently recruited or promoted employee, or an established manager (with roles of mentee and mentor respectively) and begin a staged mentoring process with the objective of supporting the

new starter in the early stages of their new career.

The online role-play is facilitated and discreetly monitored by tutors and continues until the process of mentoring the newly recruited or promoted employee has achieved a series of specific aims. The principal task of the tutor through this process is to monitor correspondence to ensure authenticity and that learning objectives and outcomes are met. Most pairs of role-playing students conduct the exercise over several weeks, often exchanging considerable correspondence. Feedback from learners indicates that they enjoy and value the experience of online role-play, and feel that it provides an opportunity to develop and express newly acquired skills and knowledge in a realistic, but safe, context.

Findings and observations

Our experience suggests that structured, scenario-based, role-play activities can successfully support collaborative and cooperative learning in the online learning environment. If well designed, they can also support authentic learning and assessment. Furthermore, although some subjects clearly offer richer prospects for the application of role-play scenarios than others, the use of such approaches can also allow for the development and assessment of a wider range of knowledge competencies and skills than would be typical in the case of learners operating online and at a distance from tutors and fellow students. Mentoring and specifically e-mentoring provide a context where, in addition to theoretic knowledge competencies, it is also possible to use the online learning environment, and its collaborative possibilities, to develop and assess soft skills.

The online learning environment can support collaborative or cooperative learning within distance learning communities in ways previously not possible. Nevertheless, the development of collaborative learning opportunities, whether through structured role-play or game-based activities, requires imaginative and detailed planning and skilful management from course developers and teachers respectively. This is particularly true where learning activity is often asynchronous and working partnerships or groups are established among distance learners of differing personalities and potentially varying abilities. ICT Technology can support collaborative learning in ways formerly unthinkable, but as Brian Hudson has recently highlighted, it is ultimately the application of innovative pedagogical practices that determine whether collaborative learning fails or succeeds in the online learning environment.

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