"How do They Help Each Other?"
Understanding of Postgraduate Students' Engagement in Group Learning in Online Learning Program

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ABSTRACT

Online learning, as a new form of study, fraught with challenges and benefits. It is about people interacting with one another and with technology. This research focuses on the perceptions of postgraduate students about online group work. Communication, responsibility and cross-culture cooperation are viewed as main challenges they meet in collaborative learning. Considering these issues, the study further indicates the essential elements in collaborative learning: time, effort, and self-control. It aims to help postgraduate students better adapt to online learning in the context of COVID-19.

Keywords: *postgraduate students, online group work, collaborative learning, COVID-19.*

1.INTRODUCTION

Although online learning has become increasingly popular, it provides students with greater degrees of autonomy and flexibility in their studies. Group work can have the opposite effect by increasing a student's dependence on group members and increasing the time spent on fixed course activities (4). Some issues have arisen around online group learning: a lack of social engagement, a lack of acquaintance with others, and more ephemeral stages of group formation (10). Although some experts believe that incorporating suitable conditional evaluation after the group project may have a favourable effect in promoting the efficacy of group work, others question its effectiveness (1; 2; 16). The majority of current studies exploring the association between peer assessment or other supportive approaches and group work contributions tend to be focused on face-to-face group work among undergraduate students (16). In the wake of the Covid-19 outbreak, only a few studies have examined online groups work at the graduate level.. Furthermore, those who have investigated online education concentrated on attitudes toward supportive strategies rather than the actual influence of online education participation on learning outcomes (12).

Drawing on previous discussions, this study is conducted among postgraduate students participating in various online groups work. It aims to fill the research gap,

examine the challenges that they encounter in online workshops, and provide implications for further studies.

1.1 Research questions:

How do students perceive collaborative learning activities in their online course?

What challenges are involved in students' engaging in collaborative learning online?

How do students perceive the benefits of collaborative learning online?

Does the suggested supportive strategy such as group contracts or peer evaluation really improve their learning effectiveness?

2.LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Online group learning

2.1.1 What is online group learning

In online learning, group work offers students with the opportunity to jointly generate knowledge, and as such, it is seen as an important pedagogical tool (3). Students benefit from group work because it helps them compare and collaborate with each other, as well as incorporate different concepts into their own learning.

They feel more connected to others and can build a learning community when they share their opinions with their peers (18). As stated by Hrastinski and Aghaee (8), students who participate in online group work also perform better in their overall academic achievement.

2.1.2 Benefit of Online group learning

Compared to face-to-face collaborative learning, online collaborative learning can be attended synchronously and asynchronously over the Internet rather than in person. With the rise of online learning in education systems, the notion of online collaborative learning has evolved as well (11). Although online communication is limited to written text, pictures, and videos, and lack of direct human contact. It eliminates the isolation and embarrassment that students experience in real life, that is, fostering a sense of interactivity and social presence among students (14). This sensation contributes to higher learning outcomes as well as the ability to adapt to a variety of teaching approaches, hence enhancing student motivation and happiness with their.

2.1.3 Challenges of online group learning

The nature of online learning presents additional difficulties for group work, including asynchronous teacher-student and student-student communication, different time zones, the absence of visual cues, the concealment of students' true identities, and limited linguistic communication cues 11). According to Zhou et al. 18), common problems in group work also include the group process, the size of the group, and the types of activities. Because of previous unpleasant experiences with group members who took less responsibility, most students thought that their grades did not represent their commitments to the project, thereby were unwilling to participate in online group work (8). Hrastinski and Aghaee (8) recognize some of the most significant issues in online group learning: students' aversion to group work, insufficient group-work abilities, hitchhiking and the straw effects. Individuals who participate in online group work frequently must compromise their own personal interests in order to benefit the whole group.. Due to constraints such as time and distance, group members are unable to provide or receive comments on time. Adding to the difficulty of online group work is the reality that some students are even reluctant to accept comments from their peers, which hinders further interaction and constructive input among group members. Garrison and Akyol (7) point out that online collaborative group work requires a significant investment of time and resources, and that it may not be appropriate for brief contacts.

3.METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

In order to examine students' experiences of online group work in natural settings and to ensure the most complete description of online group work, non-probailistic and purposeful samples are used to identify relevant, informative cases to ensure the greatest amount of variation (Diemer et al., 2012). This research is conducted among postgraduate students who participate in various online groups work.

The study sent emails and wechat invitations to nearly 80 students who had participated in group projects, among them 74 agreed to participate the survey. They received an email with a link to the questionnaire and an invitation to schedule an interview. Ten semi-structured interviews (each 30-45 minutes) were conducted over two and a half weeks.

3.2 Research sampling

A total of 74 people took part in the online survey and 10 were invited for one-on-one interviews between May and June. China accounted for 67.6 percent, Canada for 5 percent, the United Kingdom and Japan for 13.5 percent, and 13.5 percent from other countries. The study included almost equal numbers of male and female participants in age from 22 to 30.

3.3 Ethic consideration

Considering the study involved human participants, a thorough assessment of each stage of the process is crucial. The nature of group work does not inherently raise ethical, emotional, legal, physical, or other difficulties; nonetheless, the use of in-depth interviews and leading questions may cause unforeseen issues (Hiltz et al., 2000). Therefore, all records of this study are confidential and in the sole possession of the researcher to alleviate the anxiety of any potential students and faculty.

4.RESULTS

4.1 Results

4.1.1 Challenge one: Communication

Communicating with one another appeared to be the most difficult aspect of online collaborative learning. Some students indicated that current technology offered numerous platforms such as Zoom, Teams, or Skype to increase collaboration; yet, due to jet lag, it was difficult to locate a time that worked for everyone.

There were even some pupils who claimed that they had been subjected to racist treatment as well. "Occasionally, for some reasons, my group members will

arrange group conversations deliberately in the early morning in my timezone. Most of them are in the same timezone, but I'm not. We have overlapping periods, and they just ignore this…" One student reflected on his or her experience.

Another issue that arises with online group work is the issue of motivation. The majority of survey participants stated that it was difficult to divide the work equitably among the members of each group. One participant said, "there is always someone who needs to work more than others; thus, if that 'someone' happens to be me, I will have to accept the task… yes, have to…" another participant also reflected, "because managing group was tough, and the asynchronous nature of group work made it even more difficult when students from different time zones were trying to organize their schedules." Therefore, students don't like to the leadership in the group work. Another obstacle to their online group work was the lack of drive to pique the attention of all group members, which made it much more challenging. As a result of the collaborative effort, most group members simply completed their own parts, treating the group work as if it were their own asset. For example, according to one student's reflection that "they didn't really challenge one another to avoid rushing" she said, "I suppose we worked with the idea that after we each finished our part of the assignment, we could just glance at the whole of it and declare it 'done'." Some students also reported that "We didn't want to take the time to actually challenge each other to review and improve our work, so we just didn't do it. Everyone wants to complete the group work as quickly as possible and then focus on an individually completed assignment, such as a dissertation, for the remainder of the time."

4.1.2 Challenge two: Responsibility

In order for a team to deliver high-quality work, commitment and accountability are essential. For example, some team members leave a meeting without reacting to other team members' work; some fail to respond to messages of team meetings in a timely manner; and some are unable to attend meetings and complete their assigned tasks on time. Group work is made more challenging in situations like this. In response to whether they were asked to reflect on what they did in all group work and the role each played afterwards, the majority of students (60/74) said that they failed to take responsibility.

Other significant factors identified as contributing to the lack of group collaboration included the free-rider effect. It was described as resulting in little or no knowledge exchange between group members, which was unfair to responsible students in the project. "When we talk about tasks, I mostly say what I think, which makes me feel like I'm just getting them to emulate me, rather than having a real exchange of ideas or teamwork", said

one student who worked with group members and suffered from the hitchhiker effect.

4.1.3 Challenge three: Cross-culture cooperation

According to the findings of this study, cross-cultural group work is an important technique for developing understanding amongst varied students in the classroom, particularly from the perspective of the instructor, and that it should be encouraged. For example, Minocha and Thomas (13) discovered that when students were randomly placed in groups with classmates from diverse cultures, their information exchange and cross-cultural friendships rose. As Veerman and Veldhuis-Diermanse (17) noted, cross-cultural group work provided participants with the opportunity to encounter and assess new ideas from other cultures. Tsai et al. (15) discovered that cross-cultural group collaboration was a beneficial real-world activity that prepared opportunities for business school students who wanted to work in the international business sectors. However, this might not be the real case. One participant reflected "due to the differences in cultural background, my group members would believe that I was not participating in the debate when. But, I was participating and expressing myself in a different way." This participant thought this misunderstanding often conflict with other group members because they don't seems to understand the difference between cultures. Similarly, another student from business school complained about the French girl in her group insists to not start the group meeting until every group members show up in , which she finds confusing. In reality, as numerous studies have demonstrated, students confusing. In reality, as numerous studies have demonstrated, students prefer to work with group members who come from similar cultural backgrounds (4).

4.1.4 Challenge four: Relationship

An additional difficulty is the relationship that exists between pupils and their classmates. This factor hasn't been documented much in the existed literatures. This is an unusual occurrence that emerged as a result of the conversation. Some pupils have indicated that they do not choose their buddies when it comes to choosing their classmates. Most of the time when students don't finish their tasks on time, they have no way of speaking up since they are frightened that it would harm their friendship, says the professor. A pupil considers his or her actions. Another prevalent complaint is that group work *"may cause friendships to fall apart,"* which some students believe is a legitimate concern. *"I think it's difficult when you do group work with your friends because you have to take care of your friendship while also taking care of your schoolwork, and at the end of the day, you can't take care of everything,"* one student stated.

Additionally, incorrect peer input was a significant issue when attempting to measure the relationship between peers. All students stated that they were essentially invited to discuss their experiences with their group work once they had completed their group assignments. Some group members gave bogus positive comments on their blogs in order to keep their dissatisfaction with the group's work hidden in order to avoid conflict inside the group. One student revealed a suppressed emotion, which was followed up by feedback from another student *"Many times, I've observed that students don't actually communicate their views with their teachers since the implications are more difficult to bear than merely tolerating the situation and working around it."*

5.CONCLUSION

The study reflects the difficulties many international postgraduate students face in online groups work, including communication, responsibility, and cross-culture cooperation. Addressing these challenges, students must recognize that collaborative work involves time, effort, and self-control. For online groups work, due to jet lag, scheduling a proper meeting time at first is important. Besides, as parts of the team, they all need to contribute to collaborative work in order to get high grades. On the other hand, some students expressed dissatisfaction with the experience of working in cross-cultural teams. Different cultural and personality factors led to different contributions to group learning activities, which may be an explanation for the tension that existed between group members. Groups include various cultural backgrounds, they must learn to respect to each other as well. Learning, in this view, is about retrieving information from oneself, others, and computers, collaboratively developing knowledge, and applying that knowledge to the current situation. The relationship between group members is also an important point to be aware of. Therefore, this study calls for further research to consider whether relationships between students affect the effectiveness of online group work.

Collaboration, fairness, and equality are required when working in groups. In actuality, however, it is not possible to perform totally fair and equitable work. There was a disparity in skill sets among the members of one of the groups (critical thinking, communication and writing skills, as well as degrees of knowledge and engagement), while in one of the groups the members' levels of understanding and involvement were unequal. Some students were required to slow down and not only complete their portion of the project, but also assist team members with theirs, which resulted in them bearing the responsibility for the entire group as a result. Consequently, they were given additional work to perform, which resulted in a reduction in the overall quality of their job. Finally, the actual communication process places more strain on the team members than the real project itself does.

As a result, learning theory is about people interacting with one another and with technology Effective learners are those who are able to deal with ambiguity, ambivalence and large amounts of data, who are able to find multiple sources of knowledge, and who build and maintain learning groups and networks. In the context of COVID-19, students have to adapt to this new form of learning.

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