An Overview of the Taxonomy of Online Collaboration

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Citation:

Processes of Collaboration

REFLECTION:
Individuals align own knowledge, attitudes and skills with group effort. Individuals make sense of, prepare for collaborative efforts.

DIALOGUE:
Participants exchange ideas to find shared purpose and coherence in the plans and/or tactics needed to coordinate their efforts. People build working relationships and understanding of other participants’ skills and perspectives in relationship to the task.

PEER REVIEW:
Participants exchange work for mutual critique through peer review and incorporate others’ comments.

Levels of Collaboration

PARALLEL COLLABORATION:
Participants each complete a component of the project. Elements are combined into a collective final product, or the process moves to another level of collaboration.

SEQUENTIAL COLLABORATION:
Participants build on each other’s contributions through a series of progressive steps; all are combined into a collective final product or the process moves to another level of collaboration.

SYNERGISTIC COLLABORATION:
Participants synthesize their ideas to plan, organize and complete the creation of a product that meshes contributions into a collective final product.
The *Taxonomy of Online Collaboration* offers a conceptual framework for understanding stages of collaboration and ways to organize action learning or team activities so participants learn to achieve shared goals and collective outcomes.

The Taxonomy describes six dimensions of collaborative activities: 3 essential communication processes and 3 progressive levels of coordination, integration and trust. They can be combined in various ways depending on the nature and complexity of the project.

While participants may complete parts of a project independently, when they integrate their efforts into one outcome, we can describe their work as "collaboration." When people collaborate, they think together as well as work together. Whether in the classroom or the workplace, collaboration provides opportunities for people to acquire new skills together, learn from each other or transfer knowledge. Together participants can generate innovative new ideas or approaches, or new applications for best practices.
Six Dimensions of Online Collaboration

**Dialogue.**

The foundational level of collaboration is Dialogue. This term is used to describe a shared, interactive communication event, typically in the form of a discussion. Dialogic teaching draws from Socrates and Plato, who encouraged active learning through self-examination, intelligent dialogue and interactive communication. Dialogue provides participants in a collaborative activity the opportunity to find coherence in the ideas, plans and/or tactics needed to coordinate their efforts. Online dialogue requires that communication partners agree on the technology, and ensure have access and can use the technology. Are some comfortable with email while others prefer to text, do some want to use videoconferencing while others prefer web meeting platforms? They also need to make decisions about expected turnaround times, need for permission to forward or share exchanges with people outside of the group.

Through Dialogue, they can use communications technology to:

- Create shared goals and timelines for the project;
- Develop interpersonal skills and respect others’ perspectives;
- Summarize key points and build on others’ ideas; and
- Make decisions in a group.

**Peer Review.**

The second level is Peer Review. This term is used to describe a process of critique and feedback between collaborative partners. Giving and receiving feedback, and making decisions on what elements will appear in the final iteration of the project. When Peer Review is structured with mutually acceptable boundaries and set criteria, collaborative partners can respectfully provide objective perspectives and learn from each other. Online, they will need to develop
protocols for the format and exchange of materials or documents, as well as procedures for dealing with privacy and security issues.

Through Peer Review, collaborative partners can:

- Trust others to be respectful;
- Give constructive criticism;
- Compare and contrast own ideas with others;
- Work within agreed boundaries.

Dialogue and Peer Review are used throughout every stage of a collaborative process. Collaborative partners will need to communicate to decide what work design(s) to use, and they will need to communicate and give each other feedback as they carry out the project using the selected work design(s).
Parallel.

The third dimension of the Taxonomy is Parallel collaboration. When a project is completed by a group of individuals using a Parallel structure, components are allocated among the collaborative partners. They may assign parts of the work to individuals or sub-teams who work in parallel to complete their tasks. Through a process of Dialogue and Peer Review contributions are integrated into the final product. Again, they must make choices about technology, formats, privacy and security.

Through Parallel collaboration, collaborative partners:

- Determine and achieve shared goal or purpose;
- Develop protocols in terms of timing, coordination, communication styles, and other expectations;
- Create agreement for combining individual contributions into collective work;
- Develop mutual accountability; deal with underperforming team members and resolve conflicts; and
- Generate new knowledge by adapting and synthesizing multiple perspectives into a collective whole.
Sequential.

The fourth dimension is Sequential collaboration. When an assignment is completed by a group of individuals using a Sequential structure, components are organized into a series of progressive steps and results are combined into one collective product. Each component is dependent on successful completion of another in the series of steps. Each step typically involves individual work, and through a process of Dialogue and Peer Review collaborative partners determine how each contribution is integrated into the final product.

In addition to the competencies for coordination and accountability described above, through Sequential collaboration, collaborative partners must:

- Coordinate timing and multi-step processes;
- Develop quality standards so each step is completed satisfactorily, and
- Use project management or scheduling tools to track progress.

Synergistic.

The fifth dimension is Synergistic collaboration. When a group of individuals use a Synergistic structure, they work together through all steps and synthesize their ideas to plan, organize and complete the assignment together. Their contributions are fully meshed into collective final product.

In addition to the competencies and steps described above, through Synergistic collaboration partners:

- Interact with team members at all stages of project;
- Practice participatory decision-making; and
- Balance individual interests with group purpose.
Continuum of Trust

The continuum illustrates a relationship between trust and the level of collaboration. As illustrated here, as collaboration increases, so does the need for trust. Collaboration means reliance on others' abilities and integrity, and confidence that the other individual(s) can and will share your commitment toward meeting the project goal. The reciprocal loyalties and common purpose among individuals involves trust not only among the collaborative partners, but also between them and an instructor in an educational context, leader or manager in a workplace context.