

**Title of paper:** Networked learning in the real world: collaboration versus competition

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**Institution:** Glasgow University and

**Session Type:** Individual research paper (sub theme: collaborative and co-operative learning)

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**Number of words:** 492

**Five Key words:** Collaboration, Co-operation, Competition, Assessment, Motivation.

## **Networked learning in the real world: collaboration versus competition**

This paper takes an in-depth look at the application of learning strategies advocated for the online environment - notably co-operative and collaborative learning techniques - and uncovers what, in practical terms, occurred when students undertook an online module forming part of a taught campus based MSc in Adult and Continuing Education. The two year study reveals an underlying tension existing between the desire, on the tutor's part, to enable participants to fully appreciate the perceived benefits of collaborative learning on one hand balanced by the more competitive, institutional requirement for individualised forms of assessment on the other.

The online course which is 18 weeks in duration consists of one large and two small parallel group discussions centred round the theme "Adult Education: empowerment, control and the Internet" followed by a collaborative study project where participants form smaller groups and concentrate on a particular topic of mutual interest. The paper draws to light both the collaborative and competitive undercurrents of a process that turned out to be more complex than the relatively simple achievement it was considered to be at the outset. Several distinct forms of collaborative working also manifested themselves when participants formed teams to undertake the collaborative study project; some teams clearly demonstrated higher levels of collaborative activity than others. Why was this the case and how involved were all the members in those groups considered to be successful? This paper describes the forms of collaboration which resulted during the collaborative study project phase and examines the unique approaches and processes undertaken by each team to arrive at a jointly produced artefact.

As a starting point the research has uncovered that people have quite different conceptions of what it means to work together. On the part of the tutors it also revealed a clear uncertainty as to precisely how the collaborative process would unfold and how this would be reconciled with the major proportion of the marks being allocated for individual assessment. Despite this seemingly obvious contradiction the collaborative experience seemed to nurture some participants whilst exasperating or, in some cases, alienating others.

The research builds upon existing research within the field suggesting that there are a number of contingent factors which put pressure on the ability or possibility for people to participate. The electronic environment, for some people, imposed a certain kind of structure which in turn determined the kind of contributions that they were able to make. Outer circumstances (access to the technology, individual styles of working, personal crises, group dynamics, prior experience of collaborative working, language, differing timetables and time availability) personality (introvert versus extrovert), learning styles and motivational levels (extrinsic and extrinsic) also played a large part in determining the 'quality' of the collaborative enterprise. Whilst collaborative working is a complex process to manage it gave rise to very unexpected and creative forms of working which were completely unplanned. Ironically this was the most successful demonstration of collaborative activity during the module. Why was this the case?