Collaborative learning is a hallmark of adult education and a popular instructional strategy (Payne & Monk-Turner, 2006; Smith, 2005). For over a decade, as an educator of adult learners, I have integrated group work into courses. Every course requires some level of collaborative work. Group projects require the contribution and evaluation from all group members and often reflect a collective grade at the end of the project. The feedback from students is generally positive. When the students express dissatisfaction with the collaborative experience, I endeavor to make adjustments to address these potential barriers to collaboration. Recently, this perspective of group projects was challenged when I experienced online group projects as a student. I completed an Education Specialist degree online in which group projects were often part of the course requirements. While my experience as a student with group projects was generally favorable, the group projects afforded a framework to reflect critically on group projects from a student perspective. In designing online group projects, instructors should not ignore the inherent challenges and barriers to effective collaborative work. The intentional design of online group projects, focused at minimizing the challenges, fosters the development of collaborative skills.

**BENEFITS OF GROUP PROJECTS**

Collaboration "encourages students to work together as they apply course material to answer questions, solve problems, or create a product" (Colbeck, Campbell, & Bjorklund, 2000, p. 61). Collaborative groups develop real-world skills such as interpersonal, critical thinking, and problem solving skills (Underwood, 2003; Yazici, 2004). Corporations, businesses, and organizations consider these skills essential to students preparing to compete in a global market and economy (Banerji, 2007; Hanson, 2006). In a study of 94 undergraduate business students, Yazici (2004) reported how collaborative instructional strategies prepared students with skills essential to solve real-world problems. "The new global collaborative work environment requires motivated, self-confident critical thinkers who can communicate, manage, and make rational decisions" (Yazici, 2004, p. 117). For the adult learner who may hold a professional position, collaborative group work sharpens current skills. Collaborative group projects offer benefits beyond preparing students for future jobs. Group projects promote a supportive learning environment which is especially important to online students (Goold, Augar, & Farmer, 2006; Morgan, Cameron, & Williams, 2009). In online courses, distance and the lack of visual and verbal cues may create a sense of isolation for students (Ventor, 2003). Collaborative dialogue provides communication and interaction needed to reduce isolation and build dynamic group engagement (Paulus, 2005). Collaborative groups also develop communication skills, foster academic achievement, improve persistence in college, and promote positive attitudes about learning (Colbeck, Campbell, & Bjorklund, 2000). Collaborative learning enables students to work together to create a product of substance and develop problem solving and questioning skills (Payne & Monk-Turner, 2006). Rovai and Barnum (2003) also emphasize the benefit of collaborative groups in promoting active learning. Collaboration engages students in learning by doing rather than passively listening. Scholars advocate the benefits of collaborative learning and provide strategies for achieving these benefits. Successful collaborative groups demonstrate interpersonal skills (Colbeck, Campbell, & Bjorklund, 2000), promote positive interdependence between all group members (Alavi & McCormick, 2008), understand individual goal achievement is dependent on meeting the group goal (Colbeck, Campbell, & Bjorklund, 2000), and reflect on the group process (Jeong & Lee, 2008). However, scholars also report educators or students rarely meet these
CRITICISMS OF GROUP PROJECTS

Slavin (1996) indicates not all collaborative group projects are effective. Slavin argues collaborative group projects are ineffective unless the goal of the group is important to the members of the group and there is individual and group accountability. Levi (2007) cautions low levels of cohesion inhibit a group's ability to work together. Low levels of cohesion and high levels of conflict resulting in an ineffective group experience characterize some groups. Desivila and Eizen (2005) reported that negative experiences with work teams influence an individual's participation in future group projects.

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GROUP WORK

Students perceptions illustrate the benefits and criticisms of group work. Research indicates students acknowledge and appreciate the potential benefits of collaborative work, but still have negative perceptions of group projects (Payne & Monk-Turner, 2006; Roberts & McInnerney, 2007). Adult students, in particular, report appreciation for the interactive learning environment collaborative learning affords (Colbeck, Campbell, & Bjorklund, 2000). In a study of 143 students recently completing a group project, students reported learning more by doing the project than if they were engaged in a different learning experience. The students also indicated they learned something from other group members (Yazici, 2004) and that the experience would assist them in working in teams in future jobs (Payne & Monk-Turner, 2006). However, students often complain about working on group projects (Barfield, 2003; Payne & Monk-Turner, 2006). A common theme in feedback from students is the lack of equal participation by all group members in completing a project. These students are identified as "slackers" (Payne & Monk-Turner, 2006), "social loafers" (Shiue, Chiu, & Chang, 2010), or "free riders" (Roberts & McInnerney, 2007). The challenge of dealing with a "slacker" appears to contribute to negative attitudes in students towards group projects. Students identify "slackers" as group members who do not contribute significantly to the group work or complete work at the last minute (Lynch, 2004). While this is a common complaint of students, most groups report they ignore the "slacker" and pick up the extra work in order to submit a quality project on time. The unfairness perceived by students of the additional workload also contributes to negative attitudes towards group projects (Finegold & Cooke, 2006). Adult learners also identify the significant lag time between when projects are posted and when the entire group is able to provide feedback as a negative aspect of group work (Shiue, Chiu, & Chang, 2010). While this is understandable due to adult's professional and personal schedules, it poses a challenge students often avoid by working independently. Various strategies will address these challenges. However, an instructor must first examine the group project and assess if the benefits of collaboration are achievable in the design of the project. Simply designing an assignment and labeling it as a group project does not guarantee collaboration is required or achieved.

COLLABORATION OR COOPERATION? WHAT DO WE WANT?

Are group projects collaborative or cooperative learning experiences? Or does it matter? Some educators use collaborative learning and cooperative learning interchangeably (Ahenn, 2007; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2007; Trpovski, 2004). Others view collaborative learning and cooperative learning differently. Paulus (2005) identified cooperative work as the process of dividing the work load among group members with each completing part of the project. Dialogue between team members may or may not be necessary following the initial workload assignment. This approach focuses on the division of labor which may include certain group members expressing specialization in a particular task. In contrast, collaborative groups require individuals to complete a task by working together to achieve shared meaning. Collaboration is not possible without the
collective contribution of group members in solving a problem (Thompson & Ku, 2006). In a study of graduate education psychology students, Paulus (2005) reported students selected to complete group work through cooperation rather than collaboration. Whether scholars, instructors, or students use collaboration and cooperation interchangeably, the focus must be on the intended outcome of the learning experience. Paulus (2005) suggests designing the group project in such a way that the process and product requires a collective voice and participation. For example, analyzing an individual's behavior from the perspective of multiple theories and recommending an appropriate response to the behavior requires students to collectively reach a consensus. A group project requiring students to examine multiple theories and present a PowerPoint presentation on the theories allows students to distribute the workload with each group member creating a slide reporting on a particular theory. With the workplace increasing the emphasis of teams and effective team work, developing effective collaborative learning experiences for students prepares them for future jobs (Lynch, 2004). Collaboration is not simply an instructional strategy it becomes a crucial skill necessary to compete in the job market.

INTENTIONAL DESIGN OF ONLINE GROUP PROJECTS

As previously mentioned, my experience with online group projects has been positive. Admittedly, there are times I believed I would be able to accomplish the task on my own within my own time constraints more efficiently. Working around time constrains of individuals living across multiple time zones is a significant challenge when waiting on the group's feedback. However, these experiences as an online adult learner translate into strategies to consider in developing group projects, especially online group projects.

ALLOW AS MUCH TIME AS POSSIBLE FOR THE GROUP TO WORK TOGETHER

Consideration of the distance and time zones characteristic of distance learners is necessary when instructors plan collaborative group projects in online courses. The lag time between all group members responding to questions or providing feedback may involve several days due to work schedules and family obligations. It is unrealistic to expect every group member to respond within 24 hours of a request. Therefore, instructors must provide ample time for groups to discuss and come to a consensus on decisions pertinent to the project. Providing two or three weeks to complete a group project online may not provide ample time for feedback and consensus to take place. Consider designing group projects that span several weeks and build on the overall content of the course.

REQUIRE GROUPS TO ESTABLISH NORMS BEFORE BEGINNING THE PROJECT

The first deliverable of a group should be group norms they agree to in order to successfully complete the assignment. Within the first few days of the group project assignment, group members should complete this task. Developing group norms allows students the confidence to challenge a fellow group member operating outside of the norms since the group constructed the norms (Morgan, Cameron, & Williams, 2009). If the group agrees on the norm that each group member respond to requests within 72 hours, then challenging a group member not adhering to the norm is based on the group's norms not personal preference. Establishing norms allows team members to discuss acceptable and unacceptable behavior and the consequences for not following the established norms.

DESIGN GROUP WORK TO ADDRESS REAL-WORLD PROBLEMS

Students report great interest and motivation in group work that addresses real-world problems (Goold, Augar, & Farmer, 2006). "[A]uthentic, open-ended problems are presented; the students work in groups to provide appropriate solutions to those problems; and problem solving, teamwork, communication and leadership skills are practiced" as students work on projects that
closely emulate real-world problems (p. 478). Addressing real-world problems challenge students to put in practice theories, concepts, and principles. Educators should also address real-world problems by promoting interpersonal and conflict management skills as part of group work. When addressing "slackers" some suggest instructors should ignore the behavior since students will encounter these issues in the real-world (Payne & Mock-Turner, 2006). While lessons learned when dealing with "slackers" are valuable, providing students with viable options in dealing with "slackers" is also beneficial to students. Students reported they too often ignore the "slacker" and fill in the gaps of incomplete work. A more productive approach may be instructors teaching conflict management, negotiating, and communication skills rather than relying on avoidance to deal with "slackers".

**MONITOR THE GROUP'S PROGRESS**

While many faculty provide collaborative experiences for students, their involvement beyond assigning the students to teams is minimal (Hanson, 2006). It is unrealistic to expect groups to monitor their own progress (Barfield, 2003). The instructor should build into the collaborative experience a means to monitor the group's progress. Some instructors require groups to document the discussions related to the group project online in an asynchronous format. This allows the instructor to provide feedback to the group as a whole and to individual members with limited participation. Without monitoring, the lack of participation may go undetected providing no opportunity for intervention.

**REQUIRE GROUPS TO PROVIDE SUBSTANTIAL FEEDBACK TO THEIR TEAMMATES**

When evaluating online discussion groups, significant comments are required in the discussion. Comments such as "I agree", "Your thoughts?", or "Looks good" limit dialogue and prevent deeper understanding of the topic. The same criteria used in asynchronous online discussions should apply to group discussions. When the group posts information and request feedback from other group members, instructors should evaluate the substance of the feedback. Each group member should contribute to the analysis and evaluation of the information produced and the final product. "This is my contribution, edit if you need to do so", or "I do not have a background in this, would someone like to do this section for me?" lacks the contribution necessary for serious collaborative work.

**INTEGRATE SELF-REFLECTION INTO THE PROJECT REQUIREMENTS**

The culmination of the group project experience should be self-reflection on the part of students. In a study of 58 students, Maguire and Edmondson (2001) studied student’s ability to self-assess the success of their group experience using reflective questions. A self-assessment form was embedded into the project, which all students were required to complete. The assessment included an evaluation of the group experience, identification of benefits and challenges in the experience, strengths of the student's involvement with the group, and areas for improvement. This type of self-reflection allows students to solidify their learning experience and identify aspects they would change in the future when working with groups. Self-reflection promotes learning built on previous experiences in order to enhance future experiences.

**ALLOW GROUP MEMBERS TO EVALUATE THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE OTHER GROUP MEMBERS**

While there are some disadvantages to this evaluation (Ford & Jewels, 2008), instructors should consider the evaluation of each member in the group by the other members of the group part of the overall grade for the project. This may reduce "slacking" if the group realizes that the same grade for all is not possible unless all contribute significantly to the outcome of the project. Strategies are available that provide opportunities for students to work in groups and
receive a grade reflective of their contribution to the group work (Brooks & Ammons, 2003; Ford & Jewels, 2008). While high performing students often express support for this evaluation, not all students view this evaluation favorably. Since one disadvantage of this evaluation is that students may not always grade their group members fairly (Payne & Monk-Turner, 2006), the weight of this evaluation towards the final grade needs careful consideration.

ALLOW GROUP MEMBERS TO EVALUATE THE GROUP EXPERIENCE

Similar to the process of self-reflection for students, the instructor should solicit feedback from the students in order to assess the effectiveness of the collaborative experience. This allows the instructor to adjust the collaborative process and project in order to improve the students' learning experience. At times, I leave a classroom reflecting on the significant learning experience, the active involvement of the students, and the practical application of the content only to receive feedback that the students' perceptions are not congruent with mine. Inviting students to provide feedback on the learning experience provides valuable insight. In some form, course evaluation, one-minute papers, or end-of-project evaluation, instructors should solicit feedback on the collaborative learning project. While feedback may produce painful self-examination, it is essential to the process of developing dynamic collaborative learning experiences for students (Boyd & Boyd, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Simply developing collaborative projects and assigning students to a group does not guarantee collaborative learning (Payne & Monk-Turner, 2006). In order to realize the intended benefits of collaborative group projects, instructors should intentionally design the project to minimize cooperative distribution of work load, inequitable participation by group members, absorption of unfair workloads, and unfair assessment of individual member's contribution. These factors often lead to students' dissatisfaction with group projects. The role of the instructor lies in examining the needs of students and adapting instructional strategies to engage students in meaningful collaborative learning experiences. ADDED MATERIAL Sarah E. Scherling is an Education Specialist candidate in Education, Teaching and Learning at Liberty University. She is currently the Assistant Vice President of Academic Administration at Colorado Christian University where she has worked with adult learners for over a decade. (Email: sscherling@ccu.edu)

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