Education is evolving. Students are no longer required to solely participate in a synchronous atmosphere. There are on-line high school courses, on-line recovery courses, college courses and grad courses available to name a few. According to Curtis and Lawson, “Communication and Information Technologies (CIT) have raised questions about the effects of flexible learning methods on the quality of interaction among students and between students and teaching staff,” (Feb 2001). Once of the many questions posed in this paper is on the student-student interaction in a *flexible delivery system* - what is appropriate collaboration in an online learning environment.

Before Curtis and Lawson begin to explain the major findings, they first explain *collaboration*. Collaboration is said to be the “discussion that occurs during task engagement,” (Feb 2001). They mention that in order for collaboration to take place, at least two people need to interact in some form such as social chatting. Next, they discuss social interaction, which is “interaction with resources, teachers, peers and the newly added interface,” (From Moore in Curtis & Lawson, Feb 2001).

Curtis and Lawson begin by examining the nature of the interactions among students working in small collaborative groups involving and the pros and cons created by the medium. Students were allowed to make contacts via: personal email, discussion boards, fax, telephone, etc.. In Curtis and Lawson’s report, they mention that Johnson and Johnson (1996) state that the following are major collaborative indicators in on-line learning: “giving and receiving help and assistance;exchanging resources and information;explaining elaborating information; sharing existing knowledge with others; giving and receiving feedback; challenging others' contributions (cognitive conflict and controversy leading to negotiation and resolution); advocating increased effort and perseverance among peers; engaging in small group skills; monitoring each others' efforts and contributions,” (Feb 2001). Although private messages could not be used in the actual survey, students were asked to fill out an anonymous evaluation form at the end on collaborative issues within the course.

After looking at the results, it seemed as though students preferred to use email over discussion boards because it was more convenient for them. However, they felt that it was easier to read through a string of discussion boards for previous information that go back through loads of emails. Curtis and Lawson mention that there were “natural born leaders” in each of the groups and you were able to pick them out by the number of contributions they provided in comparison to others in their group.

In conclusion, although some questions remain open-ended, Curtis and Lawson state, “It is clear that setting up to use such technologies entails high infrastructure and staff development costs and may require the "re-engineering" of course delivery processes,” (Feb 2001). They go on to mention that if a student is familiar with a tool, they are more likely to use that tool over others as shown with their group two. Also mentioned was that fact that all group members participated at some point or another and that organizing and divvying group work seems to take place more often in distance learning because of the distance aspect. Because of this, it would be important for the instructor of the course to allow students time for pre-preparation of tasks. Although participants were more likely to ask questions via discussion boards and email probably because there wasn’t a face-to-face aspect, it was concluded that video conferencing or a program such as Skype would be beneficial to many on-line courses. Also, if students are given a chance to get to know each other through the discussions, they will have a higher tendency to challenge one another, which will add to the retention in an on-line course. Overall, if a student participates actively in discussions, collaborative learning does take place naturally. However, it is up to the instructor to create open-ended questions that can be synthesized, further challenging learners.

Works Cited

Curtis, David D., and Michael J. Lawson. "Exploring Collaborative On-Line Learning."

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