Go the Distance
Academic insights for distance learners – EXTRA
Episode 8: Collaborative learning – with Rebecca Ferguson

My name's Rebecca Ferguson. I work as a lecturer in distance learning. My field is educational technology.

There are several reasons for learning collaboratively. One of them is because it's a way of learning in itself. You share perspectives and you discuss things. The second reason is it's a very effective way of learning, and the third reason is employability. It's something that you need to do in everyday life. You need to be able to work with you or team.

Student collaborative tasks depend on the level of study. Beginner students: they might be contributing to a forum; they might be responding to somebody else in a forum. But when you get to higher levels you'd be working on a project with others; you might be carrying out research with others.

Effective collaboration is different at different levels. If you're just starting out as a distance learner it might just look like sharing perspectives and critiquing other people's work. As you move to more sophisticated levels, it may look like taking a lead or being able to engage with others and work as a team effectively.

You can use a variety of tools to work together at a distance. Some of those include the telephone, an online forum, text chat occasionally, Skype or some other form of conferencing, or email.

The challenges for collaborative distance learning are that it's an unfamiliar way of working with other people. You can't necessarily see the people you're working with. You don't know anything about them. You don't know if you trust them.

Shyness and confidence can be a problem if it is a face-to-face online experience. For example, you might be doing video conferencing, and a lot of students feel unconfident in that sort of situation, but in a forum you've got the time to prepare your answers. You can type something in; you can think about it; you can refine it, so that makes it an ideal way of engaging if you're shy.

Something that a tutor can do to mitigate this is to encourage people to introduce themselves and to talk on a safe subject that they don't feel stressed about: just introduce themselves and deal with something relatively impersonal to start with. Not telling people to jump in and do collaboration on a big scale, but asking them just to engage with the forum, asking them to talk to other people, gradually working up to commenting on what other people say, maybe critiquing it, maybe coming back with another opinion. So you begin to build up a dialogue. And once you feel confident doing that, you can move on to more complicated things.

The students do have perspectives which are interesting. They come from different backgrounds, they have different experiences, and they may bring pieces of information which the tutor doesn't have. Also they bring different perspectives because they're struggling to understand the same information. They ask questions. They contribute comments, which the tutor can't do.

Some of the challenges that students face when working together is they may not know enough about the other's situation, so the others may be in different time zones around the world or they may have completely different working plans. So they're not necessarily working at the same time and available to work with others. A solution for that is to share information about when you can work and for how long you can work. Another solution is to timetable how you're going to work together.

Some people have a difficulty telling the difference between collaboration and collusion. Collaboration is something you're asked to do. You're assessed on how you work together, and how you reflect on working together. Collusion is when you have been asked to work individually – but you're cheating by working together, and it's not your own work.

There are several ways of marking collaborative work. One of them is to ask students to reflect on the experience and then you mark their reflection, so you're marking what they do individually, rather than what they do collaboratively. Another slightly more unusual way is to ask the students to grade themselves. And we often find that they're harsher than the tutors would have been. And then the tutors have the flexibility to change that mark. But once again, the student is reflecting on what they have done.

Benefits of reflection include the way that you think about what you have learnt. And that brings home to you what you actually have learnt – not

just the content but the skills. Students very much concentrate on content, but skills are an important thing that they take away from distance learning.

It can be a problem if one student in a group doesn't pull their weight. But if you're being assessed on your reflection on the event, you can add that into your reflection. If you're working at a higher level and you're thinking about working as a team, then it's how you manage that as a team member. What did you do to bring that other student in, and how did you respond to the situation; so you could actually get a higher mark if you have responded in a sensible way.

A challenge for non-native speakers may be that they come from an educational system which encourages them to listen to their tutor, and learn from their tutor, and they may feel very unconfident about putting their own opinion forward or challenging anybody else, and they have to engage with learning in this way.

Understanding sarcasm or understanding nuance in written work, because they haven't got the cues of how a person is looking, how a person is moving. They have to understand it from the words and that can be very difficult if you're a non-native speaker. It's something that tutors need to look out for, and it's something that tutors can also model – explaining not to use sarcasm, explaining not to use irony and sometimes modelling the use of emoticons in a limited way.

Some people can come into distance learning with experience of text-speak and they come in and they use text-speak in the forums. That's not appropriate academic language. They need to be able to develop their arguments and they need to be able to communicate through words, not just through pictures. So a limited use of emoticons is fine but using emoticons all the way through your text is not good.

They feel that it's very beneficial because it reflects what they're going to be doing in a working environment, in many cases, and it's something they felt unconfident about before and they've gradually eased into it and they now know how to do it.

Some of the skills you take away from collaborative learning online is learning to share opinions at a distance, is learning to feel confident about talking to people that you've never met in person. And not only that: being prepared to take up membership of a team – you might be a leader, you

might be a member, but you've got to be able to work with others online. And we do that all the time in our workplaces these days.