

## **PERSPECTIVES ON GROUP WORK IN DISTANCE LEARNING**

**Rune Sarromaa HAUSSTÄTTER**  
Lillehammer University College  
Faculty of social science  
Lillehammer, NORWAY

**Yngve Troye NORDKVELLE**  
Lillehammer University College  
Lillehammer, NORWAY

### **ABSTRACT**

Current distance education benefits greatly from educational software that makes group work possible for students who are separated in time and space. However, some students prefer distance education because they can work on their own. This paper explores how students react to expectations on behalf of the course provider to do their assignments in collaborative groups. They are seemingly both positively surprised by the challenges that group work offer, and they are less positive to the downsides of group work. The paper discusses both sides of the experiences and suggests why this might be a paradox to live with.

**Keywords:** Group work, open and distance learning.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The courses when we met at campus and had exercises submitted afterwards have meant that we are forced to co-operate. This was a new and difficult challenge for one who likes to work on her own.  
– Student on distance learning course in education

Group work as a method takes its model from the Greek symposiums, the disputations of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and in particular the German university seminars of the 18th century. As a method of working in schools, group work was developed by a German called Hugo Gauding, and was a topic of interest in the reform pedagogy of the 1900s. Group work methodology, gained significant support from project work methodology in the 1970s (e.g. Illris, 1978), and today, this form of teaching constitutes quite a central component in the school life of many children. Because group work is now a central methodological strategy, one must ask, what is the goal of such a form of teaching, and how is group work realised in a concrete manner in everyday education? Never the less, these are central questions when one uses group work as a method in a course based upon distance learning.

This article takes as its point of departure the evaluation of an introductory module on a part-time distance learning program in education at Lillehammer University College, Norway. We focus upon the different ways in which the students organised and undertook group work. This program has been offered since 1993. From 2003, lectures have been on CD-rom and communication has been organised on the web in synchronic and asynchronous fashion through a Norwegian produced web software called "Classfronter". In addition to course days at the college, students were organised into groups. Some groups were placed together with consideration of geography because the travel distance would have made physical meetings difficult.

All the groups were encouraged to have regular meetings where they could discuss and co-operate on the group exercises that each group had to submit during the program, irrespective of whether they chose to meet physically or on the net. The groups were to write in total four pieces of work, have tutorials for these group works, and then to receive feedback from the tutor, and fellow students when the work was submitted.

The group work and different forms of project work have been a fundament in the college's educational profile since 1970 (Fritze and Nordkvelle, 2000). This form of teaching was therefore a natural part of this distance learning course. But as mentioned above, it is timely to ask questions about this way of organising the program in a distance learning context.

With distance learning, as opposed to traditional teaching, there is a clear difference in time and space between students and teaching staff during actual teaching (Hodgson, 1993). This form of teaching has been called "open learning", due to the structure of teaching, offers students a large degree of freedom in the planning, and completion of their study (Kaufman, 1989). It is therefore somewhat of a paradox to plan and run a distance learning program when it is based upon students working in local groups with regular meetings, or in "electronic groups" on the Internet, and working on exercises to be submitted before being allowed to take the final exam. On the one hand, most flexible learning has been marketed with concepts such as "open", "accessible" or "tailored to suit". On the other hand, the program contains a lot of obligatory co-operation, co-ordination and organisation that makes the program complex and difficult to run. This part-time program in education at Lillehammer University College (LUC) contains this kind of group work and therefore stands in the middle of this potential paradox.

#### **FLEXIBLE TEACHING, DILEMMAS AND PARADOXES**

Paradoxes come in many shapes and forms. Definitions can underline that a paradox contains contradictions, but with an element of truth, which is of such value that it is kept. This is close to the "dilemma", which best describes the situation faced by the program conveners: should one choose a flexible and liberal solution where students can themselves follow their own tempo and are dependent of only their own efforts – or should one follow the advice of educational experts about the importance of group social processes in the advancement of learning? If group work is chosen as the most important work form, is it possible to re-create flexibility by using web-based software for co-operation? In the literature on group work, didactic theory is drawn upon, but also social psychology and occupational sociology. In a prominent tradition in education, co-operative learning has roots back to Comenius (1592-1670) and the so-called "Bell-Lancaster-method" that was popular in 19th century schools, particularly in England and Sweden. When a teacher taught a small group of clever pupils, they were in turn instructors for their fellow pupils. In this manner a teacher was able to teach 100 pupils. The main idea was that, "the one who teaches another – learns double". In the theory of co-operative learning this is further described through heterogeneous groups, such that, the different abilities of the participants will benefit the learning process and the understanding of new and unknown teaching material.

The participants have to ask questions about what they don't understand, and those that do understand, must explain it to others (Johnson, et.al 1996). This key point is taken up in so-called socio-cultural learning theory (Dysthe, 2001). Language plays a central role in the communication of meaning, and when equal members explain an issue to each other, they do it on the basis of a closeness and interest for meaning, and this makes it easier to find out the starting point for understanding, misunderstanding or "opportunities" for learning.

Clearly enough, the teacher faces the important task of creating a context for learning, but it is dialogue in the group that best identifies problems and creates solutions in co-operation about learning. Social psychology's contribution to the field is to understand the conditions for security, good communication, creativity and motivation in learning.

In co-operative learning these are in focus, such that all the group members have responsibility for both (social) processes determined and task determined (cognitive) leadership. An important success factor is to acquire the social skills, which are necessary in creating dialogue in the group. To a large extent, this entails mastering emotional challenges in social relations, and releasing energy in oneself and others through supportive communication.

If the group is successful in this, the group develops itself through stages – from a hesitant beginning where trust has to be established, along with recognition and belief in the group. Thereafter, group members' thoughts about their own needs decline and are replaced by thinking in a collective manner. If one is successful, goals for the work are more strongly focused and formulated, such that members satisfy their own needs. If group work is successful, members are able to formalise rules for meetings and problem solving strategies (Schmuck & Schmuck, 1983).

### STUDENT RESPONSES TO GROUP WORK

With these different theoretical perspectives as a background for group work, students were asked about their relationship to their local group. The survey based itself on a questionnaire with open and closed questions.

25 of in all 30 students answered the questions. The students were quite satisfied with these groups, but the data (Sd) revealed that there was a relatively large difference in how the students considered group work in relation to the other planned forms of teaching on the program (Table: 1) Some students were extremely satisfied with co-operating in groups and they met on a regular basis to discuss and work with the program material, while other students expressed the view that group work had taken up too much time, and they hadn't expected such on a distance learning program.

Table: 1  
Satisfaction with the program – program sections

	Average 1(min.)- 5(max.)	Sd
Course days at Lillhehammer University College	3,72	0,56
The discussions on Classfront	2,56	0,71
<i>Your local group</i>	<i>3,28</i>	<i>1,27</i>

On the basis of these figures we wished, as earlier indicated, to look more closely at the reactions of students and their experiences of group work as a study form in distance learning. Which strategies were chosen by students to do their group work, and which problems were met by the students in group work, in relation to the fact that this was a distance learning program with for some, large geographical distances between the students?

We also ask if there is something about the distance learning situation, which places special demands on the group in relation to a traditional teaching situation. If this is the case, how can this type of teaching be developed in a distance learning context, based upon the experiences gained in our college? As data, to work with these questions, we included in addition to the evaluation of the program, student reflections written between Christmas and Easter.

### **Group work**

The reasons why some groups function well, and why some do not, are many. It seems that traditional group dynamics can provide some of the explanation, such as who will dominate and who feels that they don't get a chance to say anything: Because certain people take total control of the group and re-write what most of the others have written? I don't think this is correct when it is a case of project work. It is possible to disagree with what the others write, but not re-write it, in my opinion that is totally wrong in group work.

Technical reasons can also explain why groups receive problems, and in addition we can discuss if geography is the best way of putting together groups? It is apparent that study situations, and level of contentment, exerts an influence on other group members—those students who were not content with the program, were not satisfied with the other group members in their group. But there were also students who were extremely satisfied with the group to which they belonged, and who liked the program:

*It is absolutely the best group I have ever worked in. With our different experiences and backgrounds we have managed to co-operate and find solutions in a varying and stimulating manner – with full respect for each other's attitudes.*

and

*A goal directed discussion group, where we combine subject-based discussions with social and enjoyable time together.*

If we look in more detail at how the groups chose to organise themselves, it is apparent that two/three different types of groups crystallised, and that this entailed making choices about synchronic and/or asynchronic forms of organisation.

### **Forms of organisation**

With the synchronic form of group organisation we mean direct contact between members, either through physical meetings or direct discussions on the Classfronter electronic web-resource or by telephone...etc. Traditionally, synchronic meetings entail physical meetings between participants in the group, but as we had the opportunity to use chat channels on the Classfronter, students encouraged to try and use this communication form. The challenges met by this form of organisation were to a large degree connected with geographical distances and problems connected with communication equipment. As mentioned earlier, allowances were made with respect to geographical attachment when the groups were formed, but in spite of this, there were group members who were a long distance from each other. The geographical distance was given as one of the reasons for the poor functioning of group work and co-operation. *Despite long distances, attempts were also made to meet physically.*

*We don't live so close to each other and have little time to meet each other. Part of the group suffers from a direct aversion to computers, so it takes a long time to establish good co-operation on the Inter-net. We work well together when we are together, and I get on well with my group, we have a good tone. At the same time I am not a great admirer of constituting groups on the basis of only geography. It would be fine if there was a little more matching in the manner we study!*

**In addition some students had significant problems with their computers, especially at the beginning of the program. Precisely the use of the computer software appears to be a central dilemma when it comes to the asynchronous form of co-operation**

**In the asynchronous form of group organization, one does not have to pay direct attention to time or place. Communication takes place to a large extent by email, "the electronic room" on the Classfronter electronic web-resource, and in some cases through text messages.**

**In this form of organization, there is no direct communication between the group members, and the groups are able to co-operate despite large geographical distances, and difficulties connected with finding the time to co-operate. As indicated above, the challenge is to master the instrument through and find the optimum mode of communication. Students managed to master the Classfront web software, but it took time, and some found it extremely frustrating. Even though we are assured about the tool's intuitiveness and ability to create an overview, it is unfortunately experienced by many as part of the problem, rather than as part of the solution. Gunawardena (2003), has described the inter-face between student and computer as an important component in understanding oneself; in addition to interacting with the teacher, teaching material and fellow students, the computer keyboard and mouse complicate the total picture. If a student's feeling of being "with" is constricted by technical and other problems, the possibility of mastering and reaching contentment is also weakened.**

### **Types of groups**

**Rattleff (2001), has described group co-operation on the inter-net as different forms of communication as a) a social art b) something practical and organisational c) directed towards the task and discipline. Different groups can communicate in one or more of these categories, and in this manner each group achieves its own individual character. It appears that choice of co-operative form is connected with how the group chooses to work together (table 2). Our data has provided access to what appears to be two or perhaps three different types of groups, certainly these groups merge into each other, and on occasions it is difficult to place a group in a particular box.**

**The "administrative" group appeared to be characterised by an instrumental attitude to group work, and working on the group tasks. In practice, deciding a topic, making a disposition and allocating work between group members solved group work. Choice of topic and the development the disposition took place in a more or less random fashion. It seemed as if this kind of group strategy was dependent upon a relatively clear choice of leader, to ensure that the group functioned and a satisfactory result was achieved. For the members of this type of group, the synchronic meetings were considered an unnecessary burden.**

**To a greater degree, they chose asynchronous meetings, which made it possible to send their group contributions to other group members, without needing to worry about time and place. Hence, the students in this program were not allowed to choose group members, those students who wanted more discussions and more social contact disliked belonging to this kind of group.**

**The opposite of the administrative group was the "social group". To exaggerate somewhat, the group assignment was an opportunity to meet the other group members and to have a good time. The asynchronous meetings occupied an insignificant role for the social group because it is the social meeting which was central. The formulation of the assignment's main question and the allocation of tasks took a lot of time and could be the source of discontent and frustration among group members who didn't really want to meet and have a good time.**

The third type of group that we discovered was the "ideal" group. This group to a large degree combined the synchronic and asynchronous meeting.

They met and discussed the program material and continued the dialogue through an asynchronous dialogue. It appears that to some extent that this "converted" this kind of group, such that the participants after a while asserted that the social took too much time and that group work was too little constructive.

**Table: 2**  
The relationship between group form and synchronic and asynchronous meetings

Group type / group form	Synchronic meetings	Asynchronous meetings
The administrative group	-	+
The social group	+	-
The ideal group	+	+

## GROUP WORK AND CHALLENGES FOR DISTANCE LEARNING

On the basis of our experience with this distance learning program, several challenges can be identified with respect to group work. The results and division of the different groups, as presented above, were shown to the students so that they could express their agreement or disagreement. None of the students disagreed with the description, and several noticed themselves in the manner in which they organised their group work. Furthermore, the students were encouraged to offer their views in relation to group work and its significance for distance learning students. In the discussion the following points were raised:

- Several of the students were surprised that they had to work in groups in this program, and several were to be begin with negative about this. Their views changed and they had all become positive about group work. For many, this was a way of getting through the reading list – in other words, "a push from behind" to do something. Several of them emphasised the necessity of planning meetings in advance, so that participants allocated the time to meet in the course of the program.
- As mentioned earlier, time and place represent important factors determining the opportunities students have to complete group work. One of the decisions made by the College was to establish groups based upon geographical proximity. But in spite of this, there were several groups with significant distances between group members. With this as a background, several students meant that the constitution of the groups should perhaps pay attention to other interests than just geography. For example, time to study, different interests and work demands.
- Another solution adopted by the College was to encourage students to undertake group work, and take part discussions on the web through the use of the Classfronter electronic web resource. In order to develop this, the groups were given print-outs from their discussions on the Internet. A great deal of the frustration about group work is caused by student difficulties in using precisely digital software. There were several students who had problems with their computer, and in addition, had problems logging on and using the Classfronter web resource in the manner desired



- by the program conveners. Several of the students had little or no experience of using such communication software, and they expressed the view that instruction from the College had not been adequate.
- Some students argued for a different form of organisation for group work than the one chosen by the program. For those living too far away, and for those who had little time for the program, there was a desire for groups that worked only on the web. These groups should be voluntary, and those participating in such groups should have more computer competence than the groups who actually physically met.

From these comments, it is possible to conclude that group work as a distance learning instrument, encounters challenges that are different compared with traditional teaching. Unsurprisingly, the challenges are connected with geographical distance between the students and the communication software they use. For many of the distance learning students' group work was regarded as a tool and instrument for getting through the reading list, and for this reason, it was considered valuable.

On the basis of the analysis above, the organisation of group work, can be undertaken in three ways: geographically, according to the proximity of the group members; interest based, according to the demands of work and interest in the program; and lastly, groups that co-operate on the Internet. The organisational forms that are to be used can be left to the individual student groups.

#### **INSTRUMENTALISM OR DIGITAL SELF-FORMATION?**

Literature about co-operation and group work often argues that co-operation gives improved learning benefits. Slavin (1995) for example, argued in a convincing manner that co-operation in groups was effective. Similarly, arguments are made that the use of ICT increases the learning effect. This has become an argument against increased efforts in the field. A debate has been raised about whether the focus on effectiveness should be used as an argument justifying the use of ICT in education. Alternatively, a debate can be raised about which skills; competences – or even self-formation—are required in the digital age. In the light of such a perspective, there is little doubt that the need to communicate with the help of ICT is becoming a central skill. The question should be: how necessary is it, and should it be built into "all subjects"? In a subject such as education, where communication is arguably a central component, there is little doubt that group co-operation with the assistance of ICT will increasingly be a central part of the discipline. Moreover, much of the practice focused on methodological literature that dealt with the significance of the ideal on-line program for participants who already possessed good background knowledge of the use of computers (Klemm, 1998). A good deal of the literature argues for the advantages of on-line programs where the basic skill has been established (Dysthe, 2002).

The reality for programs on the foundation level is often the opposite. Skill levels vary considerably, and this means that cautiousness is necessary. Alternatively, or at any rate that a "back-up" in the form of physical meetings should be provided. In a classic article, where groups that met were compared with those that didn't meet, it was asserted that both types of group might be beneficial, if they agreed about the form of co-operation (Tolmie & Boyle, 2000). It is not therefore, a question of whether group members should use technology or the opposite. It is more important that agreement is reached on the way of working together.

#### **GROUP WORK'S PARADOX**

When programs of study are marketed, it is usually said that it is easy to follow and complete the program. The reality is often the opposite. Programs are complex.

The program material can be difficult to understand; socially challenging, time demanding and occasions disappointments as well as achievements are experienced.

A student wrote in his comment to participation on the distance-learning program: "I don't consider it to be a distance learning program – to be flexible means to conform. That you conform to the program curriculum" (Frize & Bredvold, 1998 p. 28). Group work makes the program less flexible, more demanding and – for some – more satisfying.

Group work contributes to increasing oppositions in the study situation, and this gives it a paradoxical character. As program conveners we can offer advice about how to master the program. Some students cannot master technology and co-operation in groups, and their efforts are negative in both respects. They need assistance in finding their own solutions.

Despite the problems connected with group work in distance learning, we found that the majority of students were able to live with the paradox: "Yes, doing group work is difficult, but we think we learn a lot from it." For these students, it is no longer a paradox. The paradox can be overcome. Our challenge as teachers in the College, is to develop social skills, both through co-operation in the physical meetings, as well as through the web-based co-operation, gradually and with patience.

In this manner, we can develop compromises between the practical disadvantages of group work and the student's need for flexibility with technology as an instrument.

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#### BIODATA and CONTACT ADDRESSES of AUTHORS



**Researcher Rune Sarromaa HAUSSTÄTTER** is an educator who carried out most of his research in the field of special needs education. He has focused on the ideological perspectives of special need education, and the philosophy of science in relation to research in special needs. He is now responsible for a distance course in education at Lillehammer University College, Norway.

**Rune Sarromaa HAUSSTÄTTER**  
Lillehammer University College Faculty of social science  
Servicebox 2626 Lillehammer NORWAY  
Phone: +47 612 88 342, Fax: +47 61288188  
Email: [rune.hausstatter@hil.no](mailto:rune.hausstatter@hil.no)



**Professor Yngve Troye NORDKVELLE** is an educator who carried out most of his initial research work in the field of international education and development education. He has focused on social studies textbooks and how they portray the "Third World". He published a book *The global school*, in 1994. His research in comparative education has dealt with issues in education relating to the Southern Africa, but also in a Nordic and Northern European context. His most recent research is in the area of distance education and the history of education. He has been a member of the board of the Nordic Association of Educational Research, and directs a Centre for Media Education at Lillehammer University College.



**Yngve Troye NORDKVELLE**  
Lillehammer University College, Faculty of social science  
Servicebox 2626 Lillehammer, NORWAY  
tel: +4761288286  
fax: +47612888188  
Email: [Yngve.Nordkvelle@hil.no](mailto:Yngve.Nordkvelle@hil.no)

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