

# ONLINE GRADUATE STUDY HEALTH CARE LEARNERS' PERCEPTIONS OF GROUP WORK AND HELPFUL INSTRUCTIONAL BEHAVIORS

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### ABSTRACT

*Participating in small group activities has emerged as a trend in online learning events. However, little is known about how graduate students experience online group work and what instructional behaviors are perceived as helpful during the group process. This article discusses a qualitative research project that revealed how online health care professionals in two graduate studies programs valued knowing their facilitator was consistently present and available. The project was framed from a constructivist theoretical perspective and a descriptive research design. Participants were health care practitioners who graduated from a Master of Nursing or Master of Health Studies program offered exclusively through a WebCT online environment. Data sources included two focus groups and ten individual audio-tape recorded transcribed interviews. The data was analyzed for themes by two researchers and confirmed with participants through ongoing member checking. The following strategies for creating a safe and engaging online learning climate for members of small project groups are presented. 1) Create groups intentionally. 2) Intervene with non-contributing members. 3) Measure individual contributions.*

### INTRODUCTION

Small group-based teaching approaches can stimulate active and engaged participation among higher education learners. In online graduate study classrooms, professional adult students returning to formal learning events can be expected to benefit from opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues on required course projects. However, participation in small group work can be a bittersweet experience. Learners may not find all group work satisfying. Educational research examining learners' experiences with group work and the kinds of instructional strategies that learners themselves perceive as beneficial during their small group work is limited. This article describes findings from a naturalistic study that investigated instructional behaviors that online health care students did believe were helpful and that facilitated cohesive group processes.

Participants in the study were graduates of either the Master of Nursing (MN) or Master of Health Studies (MHST) programs offered through Athabasca University, Athabasca, Alberta, Canada. While students enrolled in the MN program hold undergraduate degrees in nursing, those in the MHST program come from nursing,

physiotherapy, occupational health, dietetics, medicine and other health care disciplines. Both male and female students are enrolled in these graduate study programs and are required to have practiced in their field for at least two years. Graduates of the 2005 class were predominantly women and lived all across Canada as well as in a variety of other countries. Course work in the MN and MHST programs is completed exclusively online using a WebCT course management system. Therefore, convocation ceremonies at the university campus were the first opportunity for students in these programs to meet their classmates and instructors. Data for the present research was gathered during the time students were together for convocation ceremonies.

The primary medium for communication, instruction and assessment in the MN and MHST programs is asynchronous text-based threaded discussions within a WebCT environment. In most courses, cohorts of approximately twenty students led by one instructor progress through a study guide identifying a series of readings, discussion questions and learning activities during a fourteen week time frame. These learning activities can include project groups of four or five students participating in an online

