

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

The International Journal of Management Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/ijme

Collaborative course development: A comparison of business and non-business students' perceptions of class experience

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Course structures
 Student engagement
 Student empowerment
 Negotiation
 Experiential learning
 Syllabus development

ABSTRACT

Prior research has demonstrated significant increases in student engagement and learning outcomes when faculty and students share course development and implementation practices. This study is an empirical investigation of collaborative course development (CCD) effects on four dependent variables, specifically: student's felt engagement, perceived learning, course satisfaction, and ratings of instructors. It utilized an interdisciplinary course and teaching method comparison conducted over one academic year. The experimental study included six courses that were each taught with one control-group class that employed traditional, instructor-led course designs and one experimental class for a total of twelve control and experimental conditions (in business and non-business courses). Courses were selected for inclusion in the study based on the availability of a course having two sections offered during the academic year for the participating faculty. Each CCD experimental course carefully employed six student-centered CCD techniques, namely: student-faculty collaborative syllabus and assessment building; elective choice assignments; competitive experimentation; flexible lectures; and creative theory building. We hypothesized that an emphasis on faculty–student collaboration facilitated through student empowerment and choice would positively influence the four dependent variables across all subjects. However, the findings revealed an interdisciplinary-contextual effect. The CCD techniques were significantly more effective in business courses compared to non-business courses. These findings enhance our understanding of teacher collaboration with students and student preferences for collaborative education approaches in business (but not in the non-business courses).

1. Introduction

Course designs centered on student input have recently become a topic of investigation. Researchers have evaluated student collaborative syllabus development (Kaplan & Renard, 2015), collaborative evaluation processes (Hiller & Hietapelto, 2001; Yazici, 2004), course structures and routines (Dean & Fornaciari, 2014b) course design (Mager, 1997; Reigeluth and Carr-Chelman, 2007), online courses (Chao, Saj, & Hamilton, 2010), and overall approaches to active and passive course development (Stewart-Wingfield & Black, 2005). One approach is to present a syllabus on the first day of class and then lecture with periodic quiz/exam evaluations. The

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research on syllabus development suggests that this faculty-generated syllabus approach does not consistently lead to effective student outcomes (Dean & Fornaciari, 2014a, 2014b). Additionally, a prescriptive, syllabus-driven summative evaluation process can produce ineffective student outcomes because students become oriented towards the evaluation process (Dweck, 1986; Janzow & Eison, 1990; Pintrich & Schunk, 1996). Nevertheless, it seems that university educational practices are often dependent upon what has been referred to as a traditional lecture and test model as a linear, instructor-led method of planning and imparting knowledge and is a widely used instructional model in higher education (Short & Martin, 2005; Hughes & Overton, 2009; Short & Martin, 2005) even though research indicates a traditional, faculty-generated syllabus approach is inconsistent with the way students optimally learn in higher education. Thus, the emergent research question becomes how do instructors actively engage students for more positive pedagogical outcomes? The contributions of this study to the collaborative learning conversation are twofold; the first is to empirically support a holistic active learning course design, and the second is to apply a contextual lens to understand differences between collaborative learning in business and entrepreneurial courses compared to the non-business science courses.

Engaging students through interaction in course planning and implementation allows for a process of participatory faculty-student course design and shared implementation to increase student responsibility for their own learning. Aiken, Heinze, Meuter, and Chapman (2016) described the theories supporting the practices collectively referred to as the Collaborative Course Development (CCD) model. The CCD model allows for the formative involvement of students in their education process using a collaborative role rather than a recipient of pre-course faculty planning and directed implementation. This CCD model also posits that the role of students in the implementation of the course leads to a more engaged student and more positive outcomes. The student-centered collaboration could take various forms, described by Aiken et al., 2016, including: 1) syllabus building, 2) flexible lectures, 3) elective choice assignments, 4) theory building, 5) student competitions, and 6) collaborative assessment. Such student-centered collaborative efforts in course development and execution should empower students which in turn should positively influence student's course experiences across a range of variables. The current work focuses on four important dependent variables, namely: a) felt levels of engagement, b) perceived levels of learning, c) course satisfaction ratings, and d) ratings of the instructor.

The purpose of this study is to empirically test, across a sample of disciplines, the impacts of CCD practices in classes compared to classes with a more traditional pre-course faculty-designed lecture and exam format. The research design tested five disciplines corresponding to university majors (entrepreneurship, management, marketing, mathematics, and communication disorders, also known as speech-language pathology or speech therapy and audiology) in a between-subjects post-test only design whereby the same instructor in each discipline taught two different sections of the same course during the period of an academic year. In each case, one class each semester implemented the more commonly used course structure and methods (e.g., faculty-provided syllabus, faculty-implemented lecture lessons, and faculty-created assessments) and the other class used a student-centered CCD design as described below. Of course, in order to reduce inter-instructor error, the research team took careful efforts in planning and training prior to the start of the experiment. Following a review of the student-centered course design as well as the processes of collaboration, empowerment, and choice, a priori hypotheses are developed. Results from the experiment are then presented. Finally, the work concludes with a discussion of findings and offers ideas for future research.

The state of educational course design is a continuously researched topic looking to maximize the efficiency of student learning outcomes. While studies have looked at effectiveness of active course designs (Stewart-Wingfield & Black, 2005), there is still a need to understand holistic course design approaches and application to students in various disciplines. The course design described in this study allows for students to collaborate on course development and implementation.

2. Background

2.1. Course design

When students are active participants in the production of their education there is a positive impact on their learning (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991). Moreover, student measures of engagement and learning assessments increase with student sharing of responsibility and value creation (Sierra, 2010; Taylor, Hunter, Melton, & Goodwin, 2011). Therefore, co-development of education should have a positive effect on students' felt engagement, learning perceptions and their overall satisfaction with classes and instructors.

The literature calls for additional empirical investigations of student-centered learning models (Granger, Bevis, Saka, Sampson, & Tate, 2012). The model tested in this study is the Collaborative Course Development model proposed by Aiken et al., 2016. The model provides students with the opportunity for a number of decisions in the development of a course. The CCD process begins with a syllabus building exercise for students, both individually and collectively, to make decisions to develop an outline for the class. Additionally, students set the daily agenda with regular choices on topics/activities provided by the instructor on an ongoing basis throughout the duration of the semester. Assignment choices are provided to students, where the core principles are the same but specific cases/topics may be different. Collaborative evaluation is also used wherein students provide potential exam questions to create a study guide and test bank. The overall student-centered collaboration could include: 1) syllabus building, 2) flexible lectures, 3) elective choice assignments, 4) theory building, 5) student competitions, and 6) collaborative assessment (Aiken et al., 2016). The theoretical antecedents and foundational concepts of CCD are student collaboration, student empowerment, and student choice.

2.1.1. Student collaboration

Student collaboration applied in the CCD design includes students working together to develop consensus within small groups as well as the class as a whole. The instructor works with students in a collaborative way that can be considered a personal trainer

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