**The Context**

Human Geography 302 is a senior-level undergrad, three-credit course in human geography. It is suitable for students interested in the geography, culture, and sustainable development of Canada’s North. It presents an overview of the human geography of the Canadian North, covering diverse topics such as: Imaginations of the North; The history of European exploration and contact with indigenous northern populations; Aboriginal culture and society; Political developments in the North and Natural resource developments.

**Athabasca University Undergrad Model:**
- Open Education: Rather than 16, opt no other requirements
- Online distance education
- No face-to-face experience required
- Continuous monthly enrollment
- No cohort groups
- Self-paced

**The project (Evaluation in progress): Exploratory Evaluation Survey**

This poster summarizes the work-in-progress of the evaluation of the entirely redesigned self-paced course Human Geography 302: The Canadian North. With the goal of enhancing students' performance, fostering engagement and motivation, expanding the learning scenarios, and enriching students' learning scope, the course was fully revamped. Cooperative learning theories were adopted to enrich the individual learning environment. The new course design immerses students in an online community of learning where they may interact with other students in their group and other groups, learn from one another and enrich their own learning. Assessment with a research-oriented approach involves students in a supportive and reflective learning process intended to foster critical thinking, deeper learning, and engagement. The course shifted from summative to formative assessment to provide students with rich formative feedback in a timely fashion that may enable their performance for the final evaluation and also give tutors the opportunity to keep students on track throughout the course. Close and descriptive assignments were broken down and redesigned as open-ended and sequential assignments which now build upon one another which may foster students' engagement, metacognition, and ownership of their own learning. Open discussion of course work provides students with the means to debate their own ideas, learn from one another, and enrich their learning. An online interactive dynamic map was embedded in the course where students are mapping the course experience. An exploratory evaluation survey is being implemented to learn about students’ perceptions concerning the new learning environment. In particular, we want to know how much students think these strategies facilitate, support, enrich, and expand their learning. Although it is still early, preliminary findings are showing that students’ performance and engagement is improving slightly. There are indications that students grades tend to get better. Conversations with students confirm that they appreciate the cooperative learning environment and find the interaction with other students beneficial.

**The Problem — Concerns before redesigning the course:**

- Students' engagement was low and drop-outs were somewhat high
- Limited learning scope: despite the rich content of the course, students limited their learning scope to certain areas in the course
- Students were not grasping the vast cultural, historical, geographical, and economic richness of the course
- Students had no contact with one another, and yet they were selecting the same traditional topics for their assignments and papers
- The course was print-based only, with no online presence, and content was dated

**Methodology**

Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study is intended to determine the views of students on cooperative learning. The study aims to inform and persuade professors and subject matter experts at Athabasca University (and beyond our community) about the positive implications and benefits that cooperative learning has for students in self-paced online courses. The outcome of the study could form the basis for further research that could potentially determine whether or not cooperative learning strategies should be promoted for designing self-paced undergraduate courses across faculties in Athabasca University.

Delimitations of the Study

Cooperative freedom was adopted into the self-paced model for undergraduate courses at Athabasca University. It was the cooperative learning aspect which was more extensively integrated in the self-paced model. This study is focused only on the undergrad, online, self-paced, individual, three-credit course GEOG 302: The Canadian North. The survey is expected to be in place until the end of 2015. Based on the results, the same model may be implemented in other courses and further evaluation may take place.

**The Survey**

The organization, sections, and sequence of the survey make close reference to the new learning environment of the course and the learning strategies adopted. It takes 5-10 minutes to respond to the survey. To increase the reliability of the survey, the researcher gained the assistance of colleagues who have expertise in educational research. The survey was reviewed by other AU learning designers, the course coordinator, by tutors in the course, and other AU researchers.

**Participants**

Currently, there are around 60 students enrolled in the course. The invitation and link to access the survey are automatically triggered and accessible on the course from page two of the assignment. Students submit the last assignment. The invitation makes explicit that completing the survey is on voluntary basis and completely anonymous.

**Preliminary findings (Evaluation in progress)**

The survey is being implemented and data will be collected until the end of 2015. Preliminary findings are based on observations, students’ participation, anecdotal data, final grades, and conversations with students:
- Students’ assignments quality has improved significantly fewer students are submitting all of the assignments at the last minute. Drop-outs seem to be in decline. Students like the technologies used in the course.
- Students report that they appreciate the interaction with other students.
- Final grades seem to indicate students’ performance is becoming more satisfactory.
- Grades, conversation, and reports of students seem to indicate that engagement is more positive now
- Students are reporting that they really appreciate learning from other students’ assignments.

**The Theoretical Framework: Cooperative Learning**

- A central aspect of Cooperative Learning is transparency where students and teachers are made aware of and have access to each other’s interests, thoughts, concerns, ideas, writings, references, and assignments.
- Transparency is an important driver for improved quality.
- Preventive quality improvement: We are prone to provide better quality when we know that others have access to the information and contributions we provide.
- Constructive quality improvement: We may learn from others when we have access to their data and contributions.
- Active group improvement: We may receive feedback from others when they have access to our data and contributions.

**References**