Online collaborative learning
- a case study

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Background

Collaboration in combination with student activities is an acknowledged pedagogical approach within higher education and teaching. A 15 ECTS credit online course in philosophy of science and methods was offered to 11 master programs at the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences, Western Norway University of Applied Sciences (HVL).
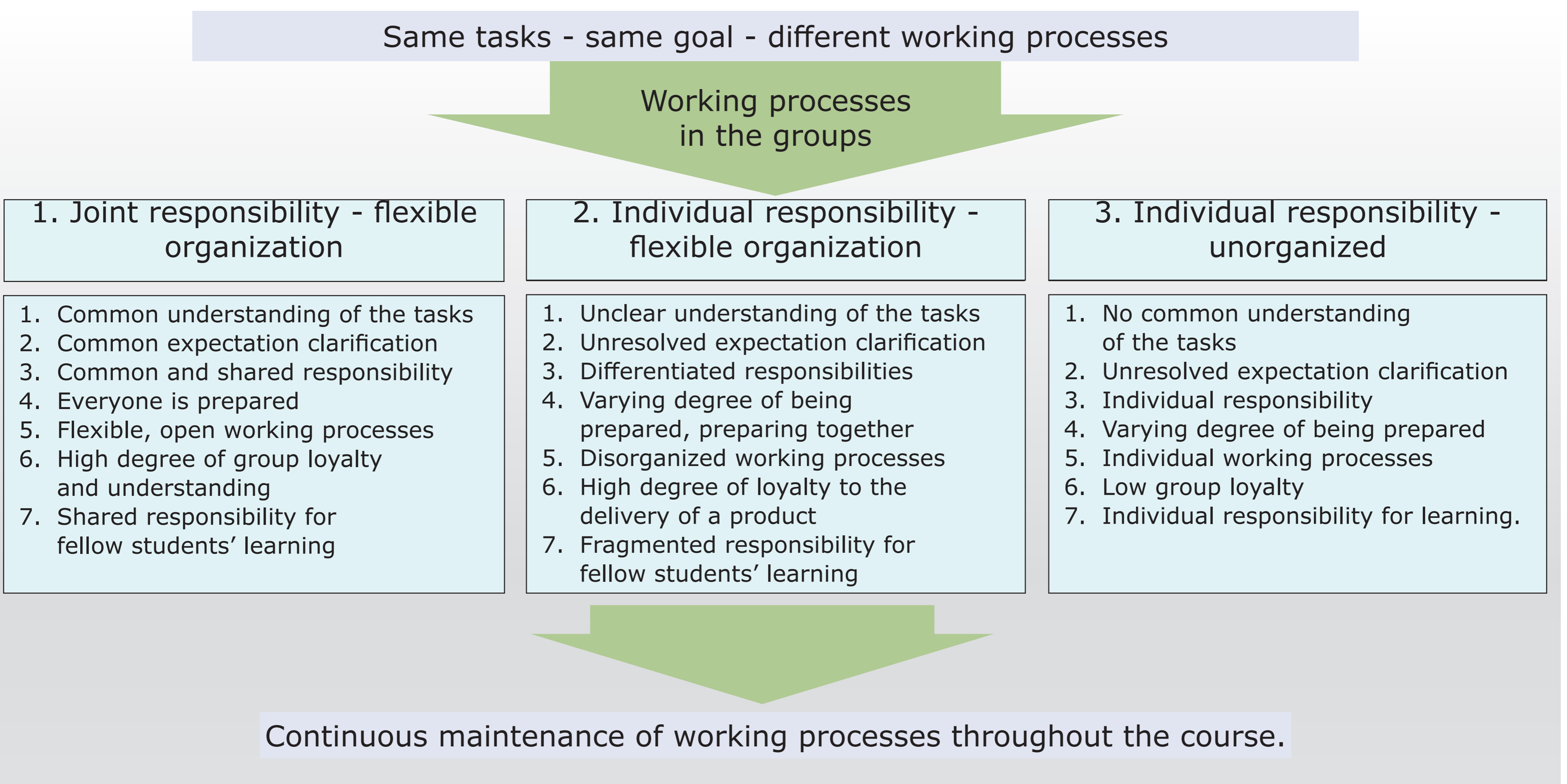The aim of the study was to explore, describe and discuss the factors influencing small group members' learning in this online course.

Methods

We performed 13 individual and six focus group interviews of 30 master students.
Data was analyzed using content analysis.

Results

The students worked according to three different working processes to solve the course assignments and learning outcomes. Data was analyzed using content analysis.

Same tasks - same goal - different working processes		
Working processes in the groups		
1. Joint responsibility - flexible organization	**2. Individual responsibility - flexible organization**	**3. Individual responsibility - unorganized**
1. Common understanding of the tasks 2. Common expectation clarification 3. Common and shared responsibility 4. Everyone is prepared 5. Flexible, open working processes 6. High degree of group loyalty and understanding 7. Shared responsibility for fellow students' learning	1. Unclear understanding of the tasks 2. Unresolved expectation clarification 3. Differentiated responsibilities 4. Varying degree of being prepared, preparing together 5. Disorganized working processes 6. High degree of loyalty to the delivery of a product 7. Fragmented responsibility for fellow students' learning	1. No common understanding of the tasks 2. Unresolved expectation clarification 3. Individual responsibility 4. Varying degree of being prepared 5. Individual working processes 6. Low group loyalty 7. Individual responsibility for learning.

Continuous maintenance of working processes throughout the course.

Conclusions

This study shows that even though contextual factors as group size, relevant assignments, and student autonomy on how to organize the group are the same, how students collaborate and work together differ. Although the various working processes promoted collaboration and learning, it was only working process 1. that promoted in-depth learning. Future online teaching might require an even stronger focus on student's internal motivation for learning, and the meaning of teacher's presence and ability to facilitate online learning.