STUDENT EXPERIENCES IN SMALL COLLABORATIVE GROUPS ONLINE

Regina O. Smith

Abstract

The purpose of this research is to develop a deeper understanding of collaborative learning as experienced by adult learners enrolled in an online course.   The findings suggest that the participants in this study were caught in a paradox; they wanted to engage in learning where they were allowed to co-construct knowledge, but they also wanted to learn independently. The students participated in a form of resistance, which resulted in ambivalence rather than collaborative learning.

Introduction

Online distance education is growing at a rapid pace. While the rapid growth is due in part to the recent developments in computer-mediated communication, it is also due to the need to offer access and convenience to students who prefer to take the courses at a distance rather than face-to-face and the perceived need to compete for the adult market among various postsecondary education institutions (West, 1999).

Despite the burgeoning growth of online courses, online distance education is often characterized by problems such as high attrition rates due in part to the nature of the environment. Garland (1993) maintains that online distance education separates the instructor, the class, and the student, which limits student opportunities for motivation and encouragement. This lack of motivation and encouragement leads to procrastination and ultimately dropout. When students fail to persist in the course they feel a sense of failure, they lose valuable time spent taking the course, money, and the opportunity to acquire the goals, which brought them to the course.

Online learning proponents contend that collaborative learning and the creation of learning communities diminish these feelings of isolation and alienation that lead to attrition (Eastmond, 1995; McConnell, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 2000). Small groups are formed in collaboration strategies that serve as learning communities. Palloff & Pratt maintain that these learning communities allow learners to establish communal ties, which provide a support system that increases commitment to both the course and the other learners.

Adult students are attracted to the online environment because of the ability to interact with other students at the students' convenience and the ability to thoughtfully craft one's response after reflective thought (McGraft & Bredahl, 1998; McConnell, 2000). Yet, these conveniences serve to limit the effectiveness of the learning communities. The text based online environment diminishes critical nonverbal communication cues (McGrath & Berdahl, 1998; McConnell, 2000) and increases the time required to make group decisions since students' postings are often untimely (McConnell, 2000). Thus, adult educators are challenged to create learning communities that exploit strengths and diminish the effects of the text-based environment.

Surprisingly little empirical evidence exists to support the promises for collaborative learning and learning communities (Bullen, 1998). Most studies have focused on the technical, instructional design, and cognitive dimensions of online learning. We know little however, about how students negotiate collaborative approaches to learning online. This study seeks to fill that gap by seeking to develop a deeper understanding of online learning with small group collaborative learning strategies as experienced by adult learners enrolled in an online course. The question guiding this study is "How do students enrolled in the online course which uses collaborative learning describe their learning experiences?"

Theoretical Framework and Rationale

A consideration of collaborative learning may help provide both some understanding of why these problems exist and what is needed to address them more effectively. Bruffee (1999) describes collaborative learning as a reacculturation process in which students enter the knowledge community to become members of this new community represented by the teacher. The goal of reacculturation is for students to acquire the community property (the values, beliefs, symbols, rules of conduct etc.) of the new community. For Bruffee, this reacculturation process is best accomplished through consensus within a heterogeneous group of students. That is, a group of heterogeneous students acting as interdependent learners work collaboratively in groups to form the transition community. Students benefit from diverse perspective while they challenge one another's' previously unshared and socially indefensible beliefs, opinions and attitudes when the transition community is composed of heterogeneous members (Bruffee, 1999). Small group discussion used in the collaborative setting encourages individuals to coordinate different points of view, which in turn enhances reasoning and higher order thinking skills that promote shared knowledge construction (MacKnight, 2000).

Two issues are important in considering small groups for collaborative learning online: a) the patterns of participation; and c) group development issues.

Patterns of Participation. Participation equity among all group members is required to address the problems assigned. Studies on small collaborative groups online reveal that participation remains unequal. Obtaining equity in participation is a tricky endeavor, influenced by several different socio-cultural issues. Participation inequality continues to exist in online collaborative groups because males continue to dominate the conversation when females are present in the groups (Berdahl & Craig, 1996; McConnell, 2000), students have unequal access to technology and/or technology expertise (Sage, 2000), and students with higher level of subject matter experience often dominate the conversation because other group members feel they have nothing to contribute (Sage, 2000).   While we know a little bit about technology, gender and expertise differences, the research on student perceptions of their online collaborative small group experiences fail to address racial and cultural differences. These issues are documented in small collaborative groups in face-to-face settings. For example, studies reveal when the critical mass of group members are from dominate groups - groups composed of White students with only one student of color or groups with male students and only one female student - the students of color and the female group members are disadvantaged because attention is unevenly focused (spotlighting) on them as the only minority in the group (Rosser, 1997). Racial and gender discrimination results from these configurations and also contributes to the minority members' poor attendance at group meetings, their reduced group discussion participation, and these configurations serve as learning barriers (Duek, 2000; Rosser, 1997).

Group development issues. While collaboration is difficult in face-to-face settings it may be even more problematic in online groups for at least three reasons. Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) groups take longer to form a group identity (McGrath & Berdahl, 1996). Some scholars (see Bennis & Shepard, 1956, and Wheelan, 1994) assert that groups grow and develop from infancy through mature adults much like an individual. Just as individuals develop an identity in order to function in more mature stages represented by adult development, groups must also form an identity in order to accomplish the more mature work of consensus needed in collaborative learning. In addition, students new to the online environment are involved in technical issues such as telephone interruptions and familiarizing themselves with the new environment, which leaves little time to attend to the problem solving process (Sage, 2000). Finally, students revert to cooperative learning measures by dividing the tasks based on past skills (Kitchen & McDougall, 1999) and/or by allowing one group member to organize the other members and take responsibility for the group task (Oliver & Omari, 2001).

While "principles" of group dynamics and collaborative learning might be applied to these settings, developing an understanding of the student experiences in these groups will enable

adult educators to more effectively transfer their knowledge of collaborative learning theories into the online environment. Research into online collaborative learning provides some information about student experiences related to the technical, communication and results of collaborative learning process. However, there is little information, within this research literature about student experiences with small online collaborative learning groups. We know what the theory intends, but nothing about how the students experience the process. This study sought to fill that gap by developing a deeper understanding of collaborative learning as experienced by adult learners enrolled in an online course by exploring the question: How do students enrolled in an online course that uses small collaborative groups describe their learning experiences?

Research Design and Data Analysis

This study utilized a phenomenological (Moutstkas, 1994) case study methodology. The case is an online course on adult learning at a large, Midwestern research university. The eight participants were graduate students, most of which were enrolled in a program in higher and adult education. The participants included an African American female, and African American male, a Hispanic female, an International Hispanic male, a White female doctoral student, a White International female, a White female, and a White male student.

Traditionally taught in FTF contexts, the course was redesigned to be taught online and in a problem-based (PBL) format. While definitions of Problem Based Learning (PBL) are diverse, one that fits the instructional design of this course is the process of learning through problem resolution. Essentially, the students are provided with a set of ill-structured problems that closely resemble situations they are likely to encounter in their practice. For example, the first problem involved attrition in developmental education courses in community colleges. Using the research and theory in adult learning, the students were to address the attrition problem and to create an action plan for the college administration designed to reduce the number of students withdrawing from these classes. A similar approach was used for two additional problems, which made up the course curriculum. Participants were assigned by the instructor to small groups of three to four students, with the intent of creating heterogeneous groups. The groups stayed intact for the entire semester. Each problem was addressed and studied by the small group, and each small group was expected to collaboratively complete a product. In addition, individual group members produced reflection papers for each problem, as well as maintained personal journals for the entire course. Data were collected using a background questionnaire, in-depth interviews with participants, debriefing papers, and reflective journals.

Findings

Although many themes emerged in the research, this paper reports one underlying theme; learning collaboratively in small groups online presented a dilemma for these students representing a paradoxical tension between their desire to work more independently and their need to work in a collaborative course structure. This dilemma manifested itself in two sub-themes a) an expressed desire to work independently, and b) behavior that suggests ambivalence toward one another.

The desire to work independently. This course was purposively designed for maximum collaboration through carefully constructed problems. Some students approached this task with much trepidation. They lamented over the need to work collaboratively in small groups and expressed a desire to work independently. Some participants felt that working alone would provide freedom to work without being responsible for their group members. Autumn laments, "I am looking forward to the capstone project as a chance to really try to some writing on my own and not feel like I have to be the cheerleader and bring other people along for the ride." Luther compares this adult learning course to another online course that he was enrolled in during the semester "You had the opportunity to get into groups. You could work by yourself

In collaborative learning, a clear focus on group needs is required for the group to produce meaningful work reflective of all group member efforts. The data reveals that the participants in this study developed a focus on themselves rather than the group. This "me" focus was reflected in an ambivalence toward fellow group members.

Ambivalence toward one another: Some of the group members approached the problems by focusing on a paper, which would reflect their own perceived "high quality work standard" rather than investing time in a group problem-solving process. India comments, "I am focused on the process of and what I am learning. They [the group members] get in the way of my learning … if I have to wait for somebody to do their bit …"

When members in two of the groups encountered technology problems, their fellow group members displayed ambivalence toward their plight. Ann C. comments, "we let the fact that the technology dropped her out, pretty much dropped her out of our thinking … … meanwhile, she would go off and get work done and bring the work back and it would not mesh." While the group members were empathic toward the member, they made little effort to inform their member of prior decisions. Autumn was not empathic about her members' problem. " … she lives on campus so I know –early on I said can't she go to another computer. I mean it just seemed kind of natural that I couldn't get on one night and I drove 30 miles to my office to get online."

This ambivalence created conditions that negatively influenced the experiences of traditionally marginalized group members. Janice, an African American female, felt that race was an issue in her experiences since the other members of her group (a White male and female) neither cared about her as an individual "if she meets with us fine, if she doesn't fine, we're going to go ahead and just do what we have to do. We're not going to depend on her, " nor respected her opinion " I would feel like I had to do double or triple the duty to try to get them up and understanding what you know I had stated …I would just feel like because racially I felt like I was being excluded." Xavier, an International masters student, explains that the members of his group were doctoral students so "it was difficult for me to follow them because they were running faster than I was all the time… if it was a Spanish course believe me I was going to be able to write faster and to write more. … I think I was able to learn a little bit less …" John and Luther, the only male members of their respective groups admitted that they did not contribute as much to the group process as their female group members. The female members made excuses for them rather than confront their non-participation.

Despite these desires to work independently, some members expressed a desire to do both, India, comments, India reflects, " Some of the group stuff is fun. And it enhances learning …I don't think it reflects individuality."

In summary, one of the themes in these findings reflect a cyclical paradox in which the members are required to work collaboratively, yet, they express a desire to work independently. While they want to work independently, they also find learning benefits to working in small groups.

Discussion and Implications for Practice

The participants in this study had an opportunity to both study and experience two fundamental adult learning theories - collaborative learning and group learning. Despite this opportunity, their stories reflect a cyclical and paradoxical challenge for them. They were required to work collaboratively, yet, the wanted to work independently. Even as they expressed a desire to work independently, they also had a need to engage in collaborative discussion to benefit from diverse perspectives as well as talk through their own. The resulting tension from this paradox was characterized by resistance, which manifested itself in ambivalence toward their fellow group members.

Group development theorists (Bennis & Shepard; Smith & Berg, 1997) explain that the participant's behavior is actually a product of unconscious authority and intimacy issues. A few students expressed frustration about the learning the theory through problem-solving rather than

having a lecture. These statements reflect the participants' unconscious strategies to elicit attention from the authority (teacher). When the teacher does not respond by giving the group members what they seek, the group members express resistance type behaviors that prevent the group from producing meaningful work (Bennis & Shepard, 1974).

Unconscious responses to unresolved intimacy issues are also reflected in the participants stories. Autumn declares, "I'm not sure .. that I want to invest the time in the team process to get to the product." For Smith and Berg (1987) Autumn's statement is a response to the paradoxical nature of group membership. In newly formed groups, the individual group members must negotiate what they must give up to belong to the group. Correspondingly, the group as a single entity is trying to determine whether it will be able to accomplish the task at hand given the members of the group. This struggle manifests itself in the pull between how the group wants its members to behave and how the individual wants to behave. Smith and Berg contend that when there is tension between group norms and how an individual group member wants to behave, invariably, the individual is expected to change and adapt the group norms. Yet, the group members are reluctant to change and adapt because a perceived lack of control may lead to dependence (Unger, 1984). This dependence creates a fear that one's individual identity will be submerged under group identity and social roles. According to Unger, humans causes ambivalence toward fellow human beings. While all humans crave the possibility for self-expression gained in association with one another, they fear the need to submit to the threat of suppression, conformity and constraint. Each time humans seek to fulfill their need for companionship from others they face "unlimited danger" since humans must open ourselves up to personal detachment and communal engagement that individuals neither predefine nor control. The tension continues and in fact can become worse because the more the individual tries to assert their individuality, or the group endeavors to assert its groupness, the amount of emotional tension within the group increases (Smith & Berg, 1997).

Amidst these unconscious and unresolved issues, and the fear of being submerged into a group identity, students are asked to maximize their collaborative efforts by working in heterogeneous groups to problem solve and write a paper together. While the collaborative small group serves as the transition community through which students are asked to work interdependently (Bruffee, 1999), they also represent one of man's greatest fears, being submerged into a group identity while losing a sense of personal identity. When this happened in this online course, the students resisted working collaboratively and instead engaged in resistance that allowed them to work both independently and receive some benefits from discussion from their fellow group members.

This resistance however, fails to provide positive interdependence (Johnson & Johnson, 1974), which is critical for effective group learning. According to these authors, learning in small groups is almost always more effective than learning in isolation if and only if there is positive interdependence. That is, each individual is concerned about the performance of all the other members of the group. The goal of positive interdependence is realized when all members of a group participate and are recognized as constructively participating in the learning process. It is clear from this study that some of the members were not engage in positive interdependence, but rather their ambivalence toward one another created conditions that led to inequitable member participation as expressed by the stories from the students of color and female group members.

Conclusion

In summary, this helps adult educators better understand collaborative learning as more than simply a pedagogical strategy. The results reflect a distinction between collaborative learning theory and the students' behavior as they resist engaging in collaborative activities. This gap between theory and student practice suggest that a fundamental paradigm shift is required in the students' epistemological beliefs about teaching and learning. The findings further suggest that adult educators must therefore, come to terms with the resistance students display toward collaborative learning and instead help learners began to examine and come to terms with this resistance. Failure to attend to this resistance could in fact defeat the democratic intentions of small collaborative group learning online.

References

Bennis, W.G., Shepard, H.A. (1974).*Theory of group development.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Berdahl, J.L., & Graig, K.M. (1996). Equality of participation and influence in groups: The effects of communication medium and sex composition. *Computer Supported Cooperative Work, 4*(2-3), 179-201.

Bruffee, K. A. (1999). *Collaborative learning: Higher education, interdependence, and the authority of knowledge* (2nd ed.). Baltimore, MA: The John Hopkins University Press.

Bullen, M. (1998). Participation and critical thinking in online university distance education, *Journal of Distance Education.* http://cade.athabascau.ca/vol13.2/bullen.html

Duek, J. L. E. (2000). Whose group is it, anyway? Equity of student discourse in problem-based learning (PBL). In D. H. Evemsen & C. E. Hmelo (Eds.), *Problem-based learning: A research perspective on learning interactions* (pp. 75-107). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Eastmond, D. V. (1995). *Alone but together: Adult distance study through computer conferencing.* Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc.

Garland, M.R. (1993). Student perceptions of the situational, institutional, and dispositional and epistemological barriers to persistence. *Distance Education*, *14*(2), 81-98.

Johnson, D.W.; Johnson, R.T. (1974). Instructional goal structure: Cooperative, competitive, or individualistic. *Review of Educational Research, 44,* 213-240.

Kearsley, G. (2000). *Online education: Learning and teaching in cyberspace.* Belmont CA: Wadsworth Thomas Learning.

Kitchen, D., & McDougall, D. (1999). Collaborative learning on the Internet. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems, 27*(3), 245-258.

McConnell, D. (2000). *Implementing computer supported cooperative learning* (2nd Ed.)*.* London: Kogan.

MacKnight, C. B. (2000). Teaching critical thinking through online discussions. *Educause Quarterly* (4).

McGarth, J. E., & Berdahl, J., L. (1998). Groups, technology and time. In R. S. Tindale, L. Heath, J. Edwards, E. J. Posavac, F. B. Bryant, Y. Suarez-Balcazar, E. Henderson-King, & J. Meyers (Eds.), *Theory and research on small groups* (Vol. 4, pp. 205-228). New York: Plenum Press.

Moore, M., & Kearsley, G. (1996). *Distance education: A systems view.* Blemont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing.

Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.

Oliver, R., & Omari, A. (2001). Student responses to collaborating and learning in a web-based environment. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning, 17*(1), 34-47.

Palloff, R. M. & Pratt, K. (1999). *Building learning communities in cyberspace: Effective strategies for the online classroom.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rosser, S. V. (1997). *Re-engineering female friendly science.* New York: Teacher's College Press.

Sage, S. M. (2000). The learning and teaching experiences in an online problem-based learning course*.* Paper presented at the American Education Research Association, New Orleans, LA, April 24-28.

Smith K., & Berg, D. (1987). *Paradoxes of group life: Understanding conflict, paralysis and movement in group dynamics.* San Francisco: The Lexington Press.

Unger, R. (1984). *Passion: An essay on personality.* New York: The Free Press.

West, G. (1999). Teaching and technology in higher education: Changes and challenges. *Adult Learning, 10(*4), 16-18.

Regina O. Smith, 501 Village Drive Lansing, Michigan 48911. smithre9@msu.edu.