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The Savior Image in Online Collaborative Learning: How Adult Learning Groups Manage Age-related Difference

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Keywords: Collaborative learning, mixed-age groups, psychodynamics learning theory

Abstract: This qualitative cross-case study examines how age-related differences are manifest and managed within online groups of adult learners. The findings suggest lack of traditional instruction in the PBL groups created a vacuum of authority, which they were unable to satisfactorily resolve.

Introduction

Online scholars call for increased use of collaborative learning strategies in small groups to increase learner motivation, persistence, and learning outcomes (Bernard, Beatriz, & Pierre, 2000). Additionally, over the last 30 years, age diversity has increased from 28% to 43% from 1971 to 1991, and it is projected that the adult student enrollment will continue to represent about 38 percent of the undergraduate population for the next 15 years (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2002). Differences among adult learners can create powerful emotional contexts for adults. Age-related differences among online group members however, are virtually ignored in the literature. Within face-to-face settings, we have witnessed how younger students sometimes complain that older students obsess about their experiences, while older learners point to the lack of seriousness for learning among younger learners (Dirkx, 2002). As the use of online small groups increases, it is important for educators to more fully understand age related dynamics and the ways they may influence the learning experience. The purpose of this study was to examine how age-related differences are manifest and managed within online groups of adult learners. The findings contribute to our understanding of how adult learners recognize and learn to work across age-related differences in collaborative online contexts.

Rational

The theoretical perspectives of collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1999), group dynamics (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Smith & Berg, 1987), and constructive developmental learning (Baxter-Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1982, 1994) frame this study. Bruffee contends collaborative learning is best accomplished through consensus with heterogeneous groups that stress both the social and interdependent learning nature. Consensus discussion encourages individuals to coordinate different points of view, which in turn enhances reasoning and higher order thinking skills that promote new and shared knowledge construction (MacKnight, 2000). Thus, collaborative learning relies heavily on group process. As effective groups mature, they foster differentiation and development of a unique identity for individual group members (Smith & Berg, 1987). The process clarifies differences among members, creating specialized roles that serve to move the emotional development and work of the group forward. During early group processes, these specialized roles are created by a reliance on stereotypical perceptions of group

member ability that mirrors societal hierarchical inequities (Wheelan, 1997). Although our society values youth, adult learners who are perceived to have more experience and knowledge may be selected as the leader, and the younger group members may be undervalued for their lack of experience (Sage, 2000). Age-related differences among group members can serve to create quite different understandings of the nature of the group's work and its associated emotional processes (Baxter-Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1982, 1994), making it difficult for group members to reach satisfactory consensus because they reflect different ways of *seeing* and *understanding*.

To effectively co-construct knowledge and share classroom authority, collaborative groups must progress through a dependency phase of development. According to Bennis & Shepard (1956), during the dependency stage the group members will initially seek to obtain direction from the leader (teacher) to save them from the tensions and ambivalence they feel about learning in a collaborative setting. In collaborative learning the teacher, who has voluntarily de-authorized himself or herself, is not available for traditional direction. The group members must therefore select a new leader (Bion, 1960). They often make quick judgments about their fellow group members' ability to contribute to the group in ways that mirror societal hierarchical structures (Wells, 1990; Wheelan, 1994). Wheelan contends that during early group developmental stages, group members unconsciously assign roles based on the limited information (such as age and experience) they have about one another. Theoretically, it is difficult to change the assigned roles because the group is unaware that it assigned the roles. While limited, evidence suggests that the online environment influences the process by which groups negotiate this developmental phase; the online group remains in the first stage of group development longer than face-to-face groups (Trujillo, 1997). The age related differences among online groups, therefore, present differing dilemmas for group members to select a leader.

When combined with the technical limitations of the online environment, age-related differences represent an important consideration that can significantly influence the process and experience of collaborative learning and, ultimately, the knowledge construction. We know relatively little about how age-related differences are manifest and managed with online collaborative groups. This study addresses the following questions: (a) What age-related differences seem to matter in online collaborative adult learning groups? and (b) How are these differences manifest, and what strategies do groups develop to manage these differences?

Methodology

The study used a qualitative design with a cross case study approach (Merriam, 1998), which allows the researcher to explore several entities or phenomena and assumes generalities among the cases (Merriam, 1998). The context involved a sixteen-week online graduate course in adult learning at a Midwestern research university. The course instructor used problem-based learning (PBL), a process of learning through ill-structured problems (Boud & Feletti, 1991) as a teaching strategy. The instructor created three ill-structured problems that were representative of situations the learners may encounter in professional practice. The 23 participants, representing a wide range of cultural, racial, gender, professional, and educational backgrounds, were assigned to small groups of three or four, with attention to diverse composition. The small groups stayed intact for the semester. Data sources included: a background questionnaire, 22 participant semi-structured interviews, student debriefing papers, student reflective journals, and the transcripts of all archived discussion board and chat sessions. Learner interviews served as the primary data source. They were edited to produce a narrative of each participant by removing the researcher voice. The narratives were then subjected to an iterative analysis process, using a constant

comparative approach (Cresswell, 1998), until no additional themes were uncovered. Individual narratives for members within each of group were then compared to identify common themes for each group. Themes from each group were then compared to the other groups to frame data analysis.

Findings

Our findings suggest that age-related issues were manifest as a defensive maneuver to address the anxieties evoked by the absence of a traditional authority structure within the groups. Older students were selected by the groups as symbolic “saviors” to rescue them from this emotionally-laden situation. In the end, however, this strategy failed to ultimately protect either the saviors or the saved from unsatisfying emotional outcomes.

Participants’ stories indicated concern for the lack of a traditional teacher role. India noted: “I’m very stately. I’m very entrenched in traditional learning ... where the teacher is the expert... that is very, very hard for me to get away from...” Students in the study experienced a vacuum of authority from a lack of clear structure or directions and uncertainty as to what they were to do or how they were to go about it, attributes typically associated with PBL. This anxiety was manifest in several different ways, such as fear of not doing it right, doubt in their own ability and knowledge, and desire for stronger direction from the instructor. Chris remarked, “A couple of times we went in the wrong direction. It was a waste of time and a waste of research. But if maybe ... we had three hours ... and asking him questions about it and talking to him about it, maybe we wouldn’t have gone that wrong direction.” Donald feared not solving the problems correctly because they were so ambiguous. “There’s really you know no right answer [to the problems]... there are all kinds of variables that you need to take in and account for.... There aren’t a whole lot of true facts.” For Donald, true facts are important because “they are facts.”

To help them manage the anxiety created by the lack of traditional instruction, the groups created the specialized role of surrogate teacher – usually the eldest group member or the member perceived to have more experience or educational achievement, to whom the younger members turned leadership and guidance. For example, John became dependent upon April to provide his group with direction. He described her as “one that kind of helped us tie things together... If we weren’t sure what area we wanted to do [assignment regarding the task], she would break it down and say well, you know this is an interesting area to you and then we would kind of go from there.” Ginger, suggested, “I think we let Nard guide us because she knows more about it and she has more experience... Some leaders are the ones who have the most experience and the most knowledge about a topic.

Although the surrogates were not experts on content, they were perceived by others to have practical knowledge about problem-solving and understanding of the text. Nard, the eldest member of her group explains: “When the interpretation wasn’t obvious, it was more difficult for my group members to understand... they didn’t have that kind of practical experience and so therefore it’s real difficult to come at a problem and just go right at it.” Anne explained: “I was the oldest person there and the topic of the adult learning was a fairly new one to the other members in my group.” She elaborated: “Their points of reference were very often really limited to the article they were reading or to the text that they were looking at.”

While effective in the short term, over time both the younger and the older members began to resent the situation. Nard exercised increasing control within her group. Noting this trend with respect to their work on problem three, Chris observed: “Our research... just got eliminated ... Ginger and I got her the information... and then she edited it. But we really didn’t have a say in

what she edited.” Regarding his dependency upon his older group members, Xavier, a 29-year old masters student, noted: I feel uncomfortable because I was unable to produce the amount of work that I was expecting from myself in terms of the papers and representing the group. As a result, he lamented: “I was able to learn a little bit less...”

The surrogate strategy was also not satisfactory for those who assumed it. Nard was particularly dissatisfied with this role, saying: “I felt put upon.” India and Donald, both older members, became so angry with their group members they took it out on the computer. India, related how she wanted to “put her foot through the computer.” Autumn began to resent her role as the surrogate in the group. “ [I was] feeling at times that the other folks are waiting to see what I will produce and just going along with it because then it’s done. So, for me it’s been frustrating [I] have not grown from their involvement in the problem.”

Discussion

These findings suggest that age-related differences became a context for the manifestation of deeper emotional, unconscious, and unresolved issues with authority. The need for traditional instruction in an environment which required the students to shift their view of knowledge construction from the teacher to themselves created a vacuum of authority. The surrogate teacher strategy employed to address this situation, however, de-authorized younger learners, left older learners resentful for the extra work, and detracted from the group’s effectiveness. The creation of the leaders who served as surrogate or substitute teachers appears to be a defensive move by the group to save itself from what is perceived as powerful and potentially overwhelming emotionality associated with working through the paradox of authority (Smith & Berg, 1987). These behaviors illustrate the phenomenon of role specialization, in which groups unconsciously create specialized roles to manage powerful group emotions (Bion, 1960; Wells, 1990). Often, these roles reflect stereotypical images of group members that are prevalent within the larger society (Wells, 1990) rather than factual information regarding member ability. In these groups, age and experience-related differences among some members evoked presumably unconscious images of traditional teacher-learner and even parent-child relationships.

These findings extend Trujillo’s (1997) study, in which similar unconscious dynamics were found to be manifest within online groups. When the traditional leader (teacher) is unable or unwilling to provide the types of leadership the group members expect or desire, they hastily create new leaders who they see as “saviors” who can help move the group forward (Bion, 1960). The newly appointed leader can never live up to the “savior” image, so the group eventually symbolically “kills” off the savior in order to select another leader. If this process continues, the group will seem “stuck” in the vicious cycle characteristic of the paradox of authority (Smith & Berg, 1987). Because of the way they framed the situation, the participants were unable to move out of the paradox. Younger learners authorized older group members, thus de-authorizing themselves. Older members aggressively authorized themselves at the expense of the younger members’ authority. During the later third of the semester, younger group members began to feel the need for more authority, but, in asserting their right for more authority, they ran the risk of de-authorizing the older group member. In much the same way, when the older group members attempted to shed the burden of group leadership and authorize the younger group members, they ran the risk of de-authorizing themselves, all of which contributed to either maintaining or increasing levels of anxiety with the groups. The paradox of authority is characterized as a continuum with authorizing oneself on one end and authorizing the group

members on the other. Each time the group moved toward one end of the paradox authorizing fellow group members, they were emotionally pulled back by the power at the other end, self authorization. Smith & Berg (1987) suggest that the way out of the paradox is to stay with the contradiction – hold onto the tensions - by working through the source of the conflict. The group members needed to recognize their unconscious and unresolved issues of authority which are embedded in their fear of losing the traditional teacher as authority and their need to authorize one another.

These fears suggest self-authorship (Baxter Magolda, 1999; Kegan, 1982, 1994) issues. That is, they needed to authorize themselves as legitimate creators of knowledge rather than a continuation of a view of the teacher as the transmitter of knowledge and themselves as passive recipients of the teachers' knowledge. Self-authorship is the ability to see oneself as an active creator of knowledge and the ability to distinguish one's own thoughts and feelings from the thoughts and feeling of others within the learning context (Kegan 1982; 1984).

Age, however does not fully account for the different developmental issues this group members faced. In this study, the eldest, India a 55 year-old and the youngest, and Marie a 23 year-old faced similar self-authorship issues. It is clear that even the group members who held leadership positions in their professional work, which required them to be self-directed and make decisions when faced with ill-structured situations, seemed unable to apply the same reasoning to the collaborative group. Shelly and Shelly (2004) argue that age and educational differences reflect both cognitive and emotional maturity differences. These authors indicate that more cognitively mature learners are able to apply prior experience to the new content. The older members of the group appeared to have more emotional maturity to deal with the complexity of the task. They indicated that they were able to use prior experience to the new subject matter content. Although they were not expertise on subject content, they had practical knowledge about problem-solving and were able to capitalize on problem solving skills in the new context.

Implications

We offer three implications for adult educators who use collaborative learning in online contests. First, adult educators need to help learners deal effectively with the ways in which they understand and accept new ways of knowledge construction issues as a group. Second, if we take seriously the need to move toward learning-centered instruction, we must also accept the fact that we have created conditions that require paradigmatic shifts. Emotional barriers influence students' movement. Yet, if one "holds their feet to the fire" and helps them learn to hold the tension of the opposites, they will be confronted with real opportunities to make the shift. If the teacher intercedes to remove these emotionally charged conditions, they will thwart the group development process, the groups' ability to produce quality work, and the individual development processes.

Third, teachers must help students deal with these emotional process issues, help them voice the struggle, and own the problems. We are not suggesting that teachers become therapists, but rather recognize that internal changes within students are both healthy and necessary as they begin to accept greater responsibility for their learning, a major goal of collaborative learning.

We conclude that the age-related issues observed in this study were symbolic manifestations of underlying emotionalities associated with the groups' developmental processes around the paradox of authority. Facilitators need to help similar groups learn to embrace and work within the emotions associated with this paradox, rather than stressing the need to learn to work across age-related differences. Additional research is needed to more fully understand how

developmental differences within diverse online groups manifest powerful, underlying group emotionalities and how teachers can effectively facilitate the working through of these issues.

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