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Facilitating Learning Online: Modeling the Skills for Reflective Practice

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Abstract: This study examined the interactions of facilitators in online reflective practice groups, focusing on the types of strategies used to convey these skills. Learners were found to use the skills modeled by the group facilitator, with the content of the interactions having a greater influence than facilitator style on learners' use.

Introduction

Teaching a course online . . . for many of us, it is no longer a question of if, but when and how we will do this. In preparing for an online course, we have numerous resources that can inform us about the theory (e.g., Cole, 2000), the planning and implementation (e.g., Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff; 1995; McConnell, 2000), and provide guidelines for facilitating these courses (e.g., Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker, 2000). There is also research about the effectiveness of online learning, primarily using outcome measures such as grades and student satisfaction (e.g., Russell, 1999). However, there is little research that tells us about specific strategies and their usefulness in facilitating learning online.

As adult educators, our interest was to understand the strategies used in teaching reflective practice in virtual groups that helped participants learn "to do" rather than just "talk about" the skills involved. One goal of the facilitator in reflective practice groups is "to help people reflect on, experiment with, and learn from experience" (Marsick, 1990, p.31) so that learners are able to use these strategies for themselves. The purpose of this research was to analyze the types of strategies used by facilitators in teaching reflective practice in a Web-based course and to examine the extent to which learners were able to develop and use these skills effectively in group dialogue.

The context was an 8-week Web-based reflective practice course that was part of adult education graduate courses being taught in five universities on three continents. The 46 students (35 women and 11 men) in these five courses were assigned to nine small virtual groups of 5-6 people that reflected both cross-institutional and cross-cultural diversity. Each group was facilitated by one of the 5 faculty members (3 women and 2 men). Each week a student presented a problematic case from his or her own practice as an educator and, with the help of the group, sought to use critical reflection skills to understand and improve personal practice. In the other weeks, the student participated as a group member in the discussion of other students' cases in their own small group.

This research draws on two areas of the literature: cognitive apprenticeship and group communication theory. Cognitive apprenticeship has the intent of actively engaging learners in their learning, in which learning can be defined as "doing" (Pask, 1976). The tools of cognitive apprenticeship include coaching, collaboration, reflection, and validation (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989; Hansman, 2001). Learners observe the strategies used by the facilitators to engage in reflective practice in order to develop their own method for doing the same. The role of the facilitator fades as learners demonstrate proficiency in the skills of reflective practice. Group communication theory suggests that group interaction is the basis for cognitive reframing, skill acquisition, and social support (Cline, 1999) and is necessary for a quality learning experience (Wagner, 1997). However, "what is not clear, at least when interaction is viewed as an independent construct, is the value that interaction brings to a learning endeavor" (p. 25).

This research looks at one component of online interaction – strategies used by the facilitator – to begin to understand the types of interactions used and the influence on learners in online groups.

Research Methodology

To examine the strategies used by the facilitators to teach reflective practice in virtual groups, two research questions guided this study:

- (1) What types of strategies did the instructors use in facilitating reflective practice in online groups?
- (2) What was the evidence that modeling these strategies resulted in their use by the learners in the reflective practice dialogue?

Qualitative analysis of the transcripts of the online work of the small groups provided the opportunity to examine all of the interactions of the facilitators and the learners in each group. The primary data source was the verbatim online transcripts (approximately 650 pages) of the nine groups. First, the facilitator interactions (approx. 312) were coded using constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 1998). Discrete and parsimonious codes were collapsed into categories and sub-categories that were peer-reviewed (Glesne & Peskin, 1992) for consistency and agreement. Second, learner interactions (approx. 202 transactions, 110 pages) that occurred during the last case discussion were analyzed using the same coding scheme. The last case was selected to represent the maximum amount of time for learners demonstrate reflective practice skills. Additional data from a facilitators' forum and course evaluations served as supporting documentation to support the trustworthiness of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

This analysis focused specifically on the facilitator and learner interactions related to the skills of reflective practice, which does not account for other aspects of group learning in an online environment. It also did not account for differences in institutional expectations of the learners which may have influenced the quality and quantity of individual participation, and consequently affected an individual's practice and use of the intended reflective learning skills. In addition, we realize that some types of interactions used in the context of reflective learning may not apply to other types of online learning groups. However, the main categories of interactions are important to understanding the facilitator's role in helping online groups achieve a high level of learning.

Findings

Two broad categories of facilitation process strategies were found across the data. One category was group process interactions that addressed issues related to the integrity of the group itself. This included interactions focused on group practices and the development of social relationships. The second category was learning process interactions that dealt with course content. These strategies included ones that attended to course management, instrumental learning, and communicative learning (Mezirow, 1990). Particularly within communicative learning, a variety of questioning strategies such as checking assumptions, clarifying, and probing was predominant. Underlying both of these process categories was a third category of support strategies, such as confirming, affirming, and prompting, that addressed both group and learning processes, usually on an individual level. Negative strategies were also identified in each of the categories, including preaching, demanding, making assumptions, and prescribing.

An important consideration in coding was that many of the interactions, while identified as a specific type, were also recognized as modeling a strategy which provided a printed "roadmap" for learners to follow as they tried out new skills of reflective practice. The modeling of communicative interactions was of particular interest because the objective of the course was for learners to be able to use these strategies effectively in their own reflective practice. The

evidence that modeling these strategies was effective was found when learners' successfully incorporated them into their group work. Examples of communicative strategies modeled by facilitators and the learners' subsequent use of the majority of them are provided in Table 1. Specific types of questioning strategies, central to reflective practice skills, are included. It was noted that these strategies were not used by all of the groups or by everyone within a group.

Table 1: Facilitator and learner use of communicative strategies in reflective practice.

Communicative Strategies	Strategy modeled by facilitator	Strategy used by learner
Reflecting	<i>All of your comments and responses to Daniel's case have prompted me to reflect on the assumptions I make about my practice in adult education . . . Your comments have forced me to think about how I practice and why I practice – Rebecca</i>	<i>I realized from these discussions that my skills are lacking in the areas of mentoring, discovery, and empowerment. Which all of you modeled so well . . . I have witnessed how members of the group have listened to each other and found some of the real, true underlying issues. This was amazing! - Vickie</i>
Asking for feedback	<i>Comments from the rest of the group? What do you think? Am I off base here? – Allison</i>	<i>How could I have handled this situation more effectively and clearly? Perhaps I contributed to the incident by not challenging the guy's initial action. What do you think? - Cathy</i>
*Problematizing	<i>This is the part I want I to problematize. They may have been acting childish in our judgment, but it may have been toward the content . . . not the person - Maria</i>	
*Weaving	<i>This is the hard part as we certainly saw with Leslie's case where she felt we were focusing on the emotional and missing the real problem. This echoes somewhat what Mason is now saying. When I first read this case, I was sure it would push many gender buttons! So, now that we're really here (and isn't it interesting that we were not with Natalie's case!), how can we . . . be helpful? – Maria</i>	<i>While reflecting, I am trying to use my learnings from your cases. Caroline's case showed me that there could be other ways to see the problem. . . Courtney's case thought [sic] me that it takes time to change people's habits [sic] . . . Lillian's case made me think of actions to change people attitudes . . . Nicole's case showed me tolerating ambiguity is part of the process - Zoya</i>
Hypothesizing	<i>Let's change the roles – what if you, as the facilitator, and most of the participants, had similar experiences as the woman you described? Would you then allow her to keep going with her experience? – Rebecca</i>	<i>What if assuming empowerment for her meant a different way of addressing the remedial needs? (I'm just speculating here . . . letting my mind go for a test-drive. - Rachel</i>
Diagnosing	<i>I am taking a leap here, but I am wondering is the "real problem" is that you are overqualified for this position in some way—able to see things and expecting to be able to make decisions—that are not in the job description?- Maria</i>	<i>I see the critical issue here relative to education is the how do we know that what has been clearly taught to a person (or group) is what is practiced.? [sic] The second issue is how can we monitor what others are teaching to the new staff? Are these [sic] main issues for you? - Katie</i>
Strategizing	<i>Perhaps it might be worth thinking of this firstly from the student's viewpoint. Can you try to think like your students and tell us, if you were a student in your class, what might make you really interested in the course – this might be anything from your expectations of the teacher, the course, the other students . . . Think broadly, but think like a student! - Eric</i>	<i>It seems that there are several issues that may play into the discussions this week – cultural, gender, age?, poor management, etc. A role playing strategy [sic] in the chat room might be an effective way to expose some of the history behind each of the roles. – Lillian</i>
Questioning	Strategy modeled by facilitator	Strategy used by learner
Checking assumptions	<i>Sophie, I assume that you had some reasons for believing that a needs analysis questionnaire would provide the best evidence on which to</i>	<i>I assume you care about your students individually. Because of your deep caring, you would like to relive this situation if you</i>

	<i>base a program for this particular group?- Eric</i>	<i>could. . . . I assume that there is much lingering frustration over the lack of closure on the situation - Elizabeth</i>
Inquiring	<i>Can you tell me more about the people who were coming to your training? How were they identified to attend, how were they informed of the training? Also, what do they need to know about the national standards - Allison</i>	<i>This was interesting lesson in culture and motivation. Here are a few questions for you: Do you spend any time in the beginning of the semester getting to know your students' interests? . . . Do you think they behave this way in your class only or in all of the classes they attend? . . .In Taiwanese society, is status gained more by income level, or by educational level – LeeAnne</i>
Clarifying	<i>Hi Robert, no problem with the way you answered, but I am still struggling to see what you see as the problem. It might help me if I had a clearer idea of the desired outcomes and any issues that got in the way of this being achieved.- John</i>	<i>Tyler, could you be a little more explicit as to YOUR [sic] direct involvement in the case you present to us. You present yourself within a “we” and an “our” context – this makes it difficult for me to understand YOUR [sic] specific role/problem. - Natalie</i>
Probing	<i>Elizabeth, seems to me you have described a rational logical approach to dealing with the problem. But I would ask, is this a rational, logical problem? – Allison</i>	<i>What I find very interesting also hard to understand is the ways and manner in which Mason has cleverly avoided answering the question of ‘what his responsibility’ in the case was. Mason could you please help the group by saying in a plain term what you saw was your responsibility in the whole situation. - Tyler</i>
Suggesting	<i>For example, would it be possible to invite former students who have been successful to visit the class to encourage them? – Eric</i>	<i>Just a silly thought as I read your response to sticking your neck out, have you tried the relationship “good ole boy” technique . . .in a structural frame this is quite beneficial and a tactic I have seen work . . . it will change your influence to bottom up. - Julia</i>

** These categories were not found across all cases but were included because of their relevance to reflective practice and examples of strategies that could be useful for facilitators to model.*

Discussion

Analysis of the online interactions found that facilitators used a broad range of strategies that addressed group, instrumental, and communicative learning processes. Positive modeling of strategies tended to result in the use of similar strategies by group members. Strategies seen as negative, such as prescribing and telling, usually resulted in lower group participation rather than replication of negative interactions. Other factors that appeared to have an effect on the development of reflective practice skills were the nature of the case presented by the individual and the willingness of the case writer to participate fully in the discussion. In addition, we observed several issues related to the facilitator’s role.

Substance More than Style

Facilitator style was of less importance than the substance of the communicative interactions in these groups. Each instructor had his or her own style of interacting with the learners, from terse and to the point as when John wrote, “you said, ‘I could change my consulting style’ I wonder to what” to chatty and personal as when Allison commented, “I had a thought this morning (in the shower no less) about GK and what we have been discussing.” This resulted in a range of specific types and total number of interactions by a facilitator, both of which contributed to a distinctive environment for each group. However, the ability of the learners to adopt and use reflective practice strategies appeared to be related to what a facilitator modeled in the content of specific strategies rather than in a particular style of interaction.

Confronting non-reflective practice. The facilitator's role was about more conveying than course content and modeling the strategies. It was important to confront non-reflective behavior using the same skills being taught, as in this exchange between a group member and Maria:

- Can we redesign this case around motivation? – Willa (participant)
- I am interested in how you see this as a motivation problem? . . . What do others think? I think it would be helpful for each of us to say what kind of problem this is to see what different views we hold and then have XX choose one for us to follow – Maria (facilitator)
- Yes, when I read the case I thought about my own personal experiences . . . and immediately viewed the case as a motivational issue - Willa

Be careful what you model. In one group, much of the modeling that the learners experienced was categorized as negative strategies, such as making assumptions, telling, prescribing, and demanding. Not only did group participation appear to be curtailed because of this, the dialogue in this group tended to follow the pattern set by the facilitator with learners contributing what they thought or their own experiences. They were much more willing to jump to solving what they saw as the problem as in this exchange that occurred before the case writer even entered the dialogue:

- I do have some questions that will help you with reflection . . . If you had to give Sarah one piece of advice, what would it be? I see a clear cultural problem with her case. Do you? – Rebecca (facilitator)
- I think the actual problem, like (another learner) said, is that they are all scared! . . . I will reiterate my advice and recommend acquiring additional funding. – Daniel (participant)

Power of the group. Modeling was an important factor in developing reflective practice skills – it provided the “how-to” – but it was by no means the only one. The nature of reflective practice to challenge underlying assumptions and explore personal beliefs made this a risky task for group members. Developing the sense of safety, trust, and openness that made it possible for learners to “try out” these skills was also a process modeled and supported by the facilitator, as when Allison wrote to a case writer, “I very much appreciate Nick, your telling us how vulnerable you felt in this group discussion. I respect and appreciate that.”

Modeling Online Teaching

We also think it is important to consider the facilitator's role in modeling the practice of online teaching. These skills were captured in the categories of facilitator interactions, but, as these areas were not the learners' responsibilities, they were not captured in their interactions. However, the manner in which a facilitator established an online presence, created the learning environment, and provided individual and group support, in addition to teaching the content, implicitly became a model for online courses which these learners may facilitate in the future.

Conclusion

We conclude with three lessons that we have learned about strategies for facilitating reflective practice online. First, the interpersonal nature of group learning and the intrapersonal nature of reflective practice indicate the need for the facilitator to be explicit in addressing both the group process and the learning process. Second, the online environment captures all of the interactions – good and bad – so that the facilitator's reflection-on-practice (Schön, 1983) and reflection-for practice (Killen & Todnem, 1991) is as important as the learner's practice of reflective learning strategies. Third, the online environment is a powerful tool for modeling

reflective practice strategies in a way that gives learners the opportunity to see, review, and then practice particular skills, revisiting interactions as needed to develop their own ability to use reflective practice techniques effectively. The specific strategies identified in this study provide a useful way for understanding some of these learning dynamics in virtual groups.

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