

LEARNING TO SEE THROUGH THE INVISIBLE: THE PROBLEM OF PROCESS IN ONLINE COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

John M. Dirx & Regina O. Smith

Abstract

Educators are increasingly incorporating collaborative and other group methods into the design of online learning. For the most part, however, these efforts reflect technical-rational views of group process. In this paper, we argue that this view of group process understates the significance of unconscious and invisible processes in online learning. Using psychodynamic theory, we discuss the role of unconscious processes in online learning and pedagogical strategies that may be helpful in making these processes more visible.

In *The Little Prince* we are taught that it is only with the heart that we see rightly and what is essential is invisible to our eyes. We are interested in fostering online learning environments characterized by teaching and learning from the heart. Such an approach, however, requires a richer understanding of the emotional dynamics of online collaborative groups and how deep learning reflects a process essentially invisible to the eye.

Online learning programs are increasing at exponential rates (Bishop and Spake, 2003; Kariya, 2003) and many of their participants are adult learners. The design of learning experiences within these programs is also evolving. While early online programs focused largely on transmission and mastery of bodies of information, more emphasis is now being placed on collaborative methods (Bruffee, 1999; Dirx & Smith, 2003), such as case study, problem-based learning, and the fostering of learning communities in online contexts. For the most part, these collaborative approaches remain defined within a technical-rational paradigm that stresses subject matter or skill mastery. More expressive dimensions of adult learning, such as fostering awareness of and reflecting on the process and dynamics of individual and group learning remain underdeveloped or ignored by both researchers and practitioners. Yet, adult learning principles and constructivist approaches stress the centrality of meaning-making to learning and the dialectical relationship of the self of the learner with the content and context of learning (West, 2001). Process issues, however, are often difficult to discern even in face-to-face groups and can remain largely invisible in virtual, online contexts.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the problem of group process in online learning, to elaborate a deeper understanding of the role of process in fostering deep learning, and to discuss pedagogical strategies that make more visible unconscious emotional processes and dynamics associated with these deeper forms of adult learning.

The Technical-Rational View of Group Process

The idea of process, as it is used in small group learning, generally refers to sustained activities or experiences intended to bring about a series of gradual changes in a particular state of affairs. Scholarly approaches to the study of group process have reflected a technical-rational perspective, stressing causal relationships between certain kinds of experiences or activities and intended ends or outcomes. This view of process is most evident in the "process-product" research paradigm prevalent in the 1960s and now, with prompting from governmental policy, is re-emerging. This perspective stresses task-oriented behaviors within group process (Wheelan, 1994) and group emotions are regarded as either in the service of or potentially hindering group

goals. Task-related process issues considered most important are identified based on their contribution to the group's overall productivity and performance. This focus is reflected in concern for particular kinds of verbal and nonverbal behaviors, problem-solving processes, reflection, information-retrieval processes, and patterns and flow of communication.

Emotional behaviors are largely regarded as either interfering with the efficacy of task processes, thereby reducing overall group productivity and performance or, when managed well, contributing to enhanced group performance. From this perspective, effective groups are thought to develop strategies to manage these emotional issues in ways that minimizes their effects on problem-solving and other task-oriented behaviors. In general, then, a technical-rational perspective assumes group processes are a) generally regarded as a conscious aspect of group life, b) reflected in clearly observable behaviors, c) associated with its overall productivity and performance, and d) potentially amenable to rational reflection and manipulation.

A Psychodynamic View of Group Process

Recent scholarship has led many to question strictly technical-rational understandings of group process. In particular, psychodynamic theories of teaching, learning, and small group behavior suggest a view of group process and learning complicated by desire, fantasy, unconscious resistance to learning, defense mechanisms, and dynamics of the group-as-a-whole. (Boyd, 1991; Britzman, 1998; Durkin, 1964; Hart, 2001; McLeod & Kettner-Polley, 2004; Person, 1995; Pitt, 2003; Slater, 1966; Smith & Berg, 1997; Todd, 1997).

Participants in adult learning groups often find themselves engulfed in and swamped by powerful emotions that arise from unconscious dynamics within learning groups. Although emotions themselves are often quite visible and observable in group interaction (though not always), they none-the-less suggest underlying issues and dynamics within the group that are latent or not readily manifest or observable. These emotions are generally rooted in unconscious conflicts and issues that are evoked through engagement and participation in the group's work. That is, what is manifest in observable emotion-laden behaviors is usually symbolic of underlying emotional issues beyond the group's conscious level of awareness. Despite their latent character, however, these emotional issues have a powerful potential to affect group life and groups often develop elaborate strategies to cope with or address their presence in the group.

The psychodynamic view of group process challenges the distinction between emotional and task-oriented behaviors made in more technical-rational views of process, suggesting that learning from these emotional processes is the task of the group or at least a critical aspect of its work (McLeod & Kettner-Polley, 2004).

Process, as reflected in the emotional dynamics, images, and issues associated with both the individual and group-as-a-whole levels (Smith & Berg, 1987), is a critical dimension of meaning-making, learning, development, and change in online groups. Perceiving, interpreting, and facilitating group process associated with these dynamics and issues are critical to meaning-making, learning, and change. Similar to models of experience-based learning (Kolb, 1984), group process represents a powerful context that contributes to how groups and individuals in these groups understand and make sense of the work of the group.

In particular, unconscious emotional dynamics evoked by the group's work exert considerable influence on the nature of learning in the group. These critically important process issues,

however, are often wrapped in or masked by attention to what seem to be task-related issues. The process of making sense of our life experiences is often manifest symbolically by emotionally-laden fantasies (Person, 1995) or images (Watkins, 1984). It is in this sense that we might approach our work with group process as if its characteristics were a kind of waking dream (Watkins, 1984). Like our own individual dreams, these images have the potential to help reveal a deeper understanding of the psychic life of the group. We might approach certain group process issues as “messengers of the soul” (Dirkx, 1997), reflecting important information regarding the individual and collective journey of the psyche.

Manifestations of Emotional Issues in Online Learning Groups

The psychodynamic perspective can be illustrated by three key emotional issues that we have observed in our work with adult online learning groups: 1) The problem of voice or identity; 2) The need to authorize others while wanting authority for one’s self; and 3) Developing meaningful relationships with other group members. While issues could be selected, these are three that seem particularly salient within online learning groups.

The Problem of Voice and Individuality

In our research with online groups (Dirkx & Smith, 2003), the concept of individuality seems tightly bound up with a sense of voice, as though a loss of voice equates with a loss of individuality. In talking about a situation where she felt her voice was not valued, Janis lamented, “I felt left in the cold... non-existent.” This concern for the loss of individuality, however, extends beyond one’s own sense of voice. Chris pointed out that, when she was group facilitator, she made sure “we weren’t missing anything ...that we included everybody else’s information.” Janis echoed this perspective: “Everyone’s [voice] in the group should be heard and seen in the product.”

The emphasis on individual voice often occurs at the expense of reaching agreement or consensus. Even though others might perceive a group member’s contribution as completely disconnected from the rest of the work completed, the contribution is included. Scarlett explains, “One person can’t decide that one piece doesn’t work, because that is what they contributed. You just can’t throw something out. I mean, you can’t do it even though you know that it doesn’t seem to connect with what the rest of the group has done. But you can’t, you just can’t do it, it doesn’t seem to be fair.”

Thus, considerable emotionality evolves in small learning groups around the problem of voice and the potential threat of the group to obliterating one’s sense of individuality and identity.

Need to Authorize Others

The problem of authority often surfaces as a critical issue in many adult learning groups (Bruffee, 1999) and online groups are no exception. One of the ways this has been manifest online is through conflict over how much structure and direction is needed by the group. Adult learning groups that meet over time often develop two opposing, emotionally-charged perspectives on the role of the teacher or leader (Smith & Berg, 1987). Proponents of one perspective will demand more structure, guidance and direction from the teacher. For example, in one group Donald expressed a desire for more structure: “If I could have more teacher-directed information, that would be helpful.” Others will actively resist such attempts and even suggest that less structure, rather than more, might be needed. Walden explains that although the course was intended to create a constructivist environment, “it feels like a transmission model... I find that the problem based model doesn’t give the freedom that it says it gives.”

In working through this dilemma of how much structure and guidance is needed or expected from the teacher, group members often find themselves engaged in a process of deauthorizing the teacher and authorizing themselves and one another (Smith & Berg, 1987). Yet, as they struggle to authorize each other, they also run the risk of deauthorizing themselves. Part of this struggle with authorization is evident in the preceding examples illustrating the problem of voice. In including all voices, regardless of their value to the product, members admit an unwillingness to do the hard emotional work necessary around the problem of authority.

Developing Meaningful Relationships

Another emotionally-laden issue that emerges in online groups reflects the struggle to develop authentic and meaningful relationships and interactions with other group members (Boyd, 1991; Bruffee, 1999). Some groups might develop conflict around the degree to which members share aspects of their experiences and lives in the work of the group. For example, in one group Chris described the extent to which they would go to stay connected over a holiday break when group members were all in different places: "It was always like okay, checking in, where are you? Where are you going to be? Give me your fax number, your cell number. I'm going to be at this email, but I'm shutting my computer off at this time so if you're going to get me something, get it to me before then, otherwise I'll call you or fax you." Yet Janis complained: "I think...there can be a little too much interaction to where the focus is so much on you interacting with these people to where you are not being able to spend the time to read the material and grasps the concepts and apply it to situations."

Many scholars have written about how small groups struggle with the problems of inclusion and intimacy (Bruffee, 1999; Wheelan, 1994). In our work with online groups, members devote considerable energy to negotiating the conflicts that arise around the need to establish meaningful relationships and structures for authentic interaction. As is evident from the preceding examples, these conflicts arise within the context of task-related concerns but are usually fueled by deep, underlying psychic conflicts around relatedness (Boyd, 1991). These conflicts are only dimly visible, if at all, if one merely focuses only on manifest content.

Making the Invisible Visible

Our research has underscored the importance for learning in online contexts of unconscious emotional dynamics that are often masked by and folded within attention to task-related concerns. Yet, much remains to be explored further. One of these areas is how we might "see" in virtual environments group dynamics that are not only unconscious but also difficult to discern. Furthermore, more work is needed on how we might assist groups and learners to become more aware of these unconscious dynamics and to help them develop a deeper understanding of the role these dynamics play in their learning and meaning-making processes. We conclude by summarizing a few ideas that merit further scholarly study.

First, teachers working in and with online collaborative groups must learn to work with group processes more from a symbolic perspective, as well as the more traditional instrumental view. We can recognize when underlying emotional issues are really the focus of a group's concern by noticing the level of emotionality present in the group. Relatively high levels of emotionality are often indicative of underlying issues evoking concern and even anxiety within the group (Boyd, 1991). In the presence of powerful emotional issues, the group's processes seem less well-organized, even chaotic at times. Conversations and interactions might jump around considerably and not stay within a clearly defined focus and the group seems to be talking more

about underlying issues than about manifest content. Discussion is not very systematic or reflective. During these periods, it is helpful to observe those emotional issues that are manifest across individuals within a given group and across different groups within a class. Often, when this is done we can perceive a common theme or image that is at the core of the group's concern, such as fear of being obliterated by the power of the group.

When, as facilitators, we become aware of the presence of these powerful emotional issues within an online group, it is helpful to keep the group grounded within the issues at hand, and not let the group fly off on tangential issues or topics having little to do with their present situation. In our input, we want to reflect back to the group emotional issues that are surfacing and help the group deepen their awareness of the process issues and what they might mean for the group. The assumption here is that the emotional issues arose, in part, in response to being evoked through some aspect of the context and/or content. In working through these issues, the group may need some assistance in maintaining that focus. We can do this, for example, with occasional postings to discussion boards that indirectly pose what are perceived to be the group's issue. In doing so, however, it is important to avoid intellectualizing what are essentially emotional issues and to not be seduced by traditional, analytic approaches we so often use in the academy. Analogies and metaphors are potentially powerful ways to provide online groups with this kind of feedback.

Encouraging individual members to describe more fully what particular emotional situations in the group feel like, without being judgmental or analytic. We want members to connect with how the situation feels to them and to describe these feelings for the rest of the group. These descriptions can be further deepened by asking group members to associate their feelings with other kinds of similar experiences they may have had and how the present experience reminds them of these earlier experiences. For example, they may be perceiving a lack of voice, of not being taken seriously, and being fearful of being smothered by the group. By asking them to think about other learning group situations of which this experience reminds them helps them and other members see the ways in which this issue has manifest itself in other kinds of learning groups and within their own lives as learners. It reflects our concern as teachers with deep learning that can be potentially transformative within online learning groups. In addition to reviewing discussion threads and chat room archives, we can ask participants to maintain learning journals that describe and reflect on their group experiences. Periodic review of these journals, as well as more formal reflection papers, can also foster awareness of unconscious group processes.

In conclusion, online environments present unique challenges to adult educators and learners committed to integrating process with task-oriented learning. Such a commitment asks us to attend to the emotional issues of online learning groups by involving our hearts rather than just our heads, of learning to see through that which seems invisible to the eye. After all, it is in the depths where we might expect deep learning to occur.

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John M. Dirx, Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education, Michigan State University,
dirx@msu.edu.

Regina O. Smith, Portland State University, Department of Educational Policy, Foundations and Administrative Studies smithre9@msu.edu.

Presented at the Midwest Research-to Practice Conference in Adult, Continuing, and Community Education, Indiana University, Indianapolis, IN, October 6-8, 2004.