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Lost in Familiar Places:
The Struggle for Voice and Belonging in Online Adult Learning Groups

Regina O. Smith
John M. Dirkx

Abstract: Many adults express a preference for learning in small groups but often find their group experiences frustrating and dissatisfying. This tension is increasingly evident in online learning, as collaborative methods become more popular within these environments. The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of the emotional dynamics and processes reflected in this tension within online collaborative environments. Our findings suggest that online learning groups display behaviors that reflect two powerful, alternating, cyclical fears. On the one hand, the groups act as if they perceive a definite threat to individual identity. Such actions, however, seem to precipitate a corresponding fear of alienation and disconnectedness among group members. Getting stuck in this cycle of alternating fears may account for the lingering dissatisfaction adults have with group learning.

Introduction

Within the last ten years online learning programs in adult and higher education have increased dramatically. Many institutions offering adult and continuing education now have or are exploring some form of online learning (West, 1999). Early online programs were simply electronic versions of old correspondence courses, in which large amounts of information were uploaded and transmitted to relatively passive recipients (Boshier, Mohapi, & Boulton, 1997). Within these environments, learners eventually complained of feeling alone and disconnected from others in the course and reported few substantive interactions with their instructors (Bullen, 1998). Increasingly alienated, many learners struggled with their courses, and attrition rates in online programs soared (Bullen, 1998). To counteract this trend, scholars and practitioners advocated the use of collaborative learning environments (Haraism, 1987; McKnight, 2000). While these approaches substantially increase the level of interaction within online learning, to be effective they also require fundamental shifts in relations of power within the learning environment. Teachers need to de-authorize themselves and delegate much of their traditional authority to individual learners and the groups in which they work (Bruffee, 1999). Furthermore, effective collaboration requires relatively high levels of relatedness and intimacy among group members. Fears of alienation and disconnections among our learners have now been replaced with fears of fusion and loss of voice, individuality, and identity. Learners participating in online collaborative groups seem increasingly lost in what many regard as adult education *par excellence* (Brookfield, 1986). In this study, we examined the powerful tension that evolves in online learning groups between the desire to belong and the struggle for voice and individual identity within the learning environment.

Theoretical Framework

Traditional educational settings reflect what Bruffee (1999) refers to as foundationalist approaches to teaching and learning. In such settings, the teacher remains the primary focus and source of authority, learners assume relatively little authority for what is learned or how, interactions and relations around the subject matter are limited to unidirectional exchanges between the teacher and individual learners, and interaction and dialogue among learners are infrequent. This approach has characterized many types of online learning that have basically relied on electronic correspondence methods and focused on transmissions of large amounts of information or skill. The shift to more collaborative online environments, however, challenges these fundamental assumptions. Learners are expected to work together in small, heterogeneous groups (Bruffee, 1999) to address and resolve complex, real-life problems that are messy and ill-defined (Jonassen, 1997). Traditional structures of authority are de-emphasized or even absent altogether. Through participation and decision-making in small groups, learners participate in shared classroom authority (Bruffee, 1999) and the co-construction of meaning and knowledge.

In collaborative settings, learners explicitly and directly address issues of authority and intimacy or relatedness that, in more traditional settings are largely implicit and unacknowledged. In the absence of teacher-imposed authority structures, adults learn to recognize and confront the various ways in which they express dependence on authority, thereby authorizing themselves. As members struggle with this process, they find themselves confronting the paradox of authority (Smith & Berg, 1987): Authorizing oneself within the group seems to come at the expense of the authority of others in the group. Authorization of others, however, has the effect of deauthorizing oneself. Working through this paradox so that all feel authorized and empowered represents one of the great challenges for collaborative learning groups (Bruffee, 1999), because it raises the challenge of developing intimacy or relatedness (Bennis & Shepard, 1954; Wheelan, 1994). Developing such levels of closeness and intimacy are tasks not generally expected of learners who are used to and comfortable with foundationalist approaches to teaching. To develop such levels of intimacy, individuals must set aside their preoccupations and concerns for their own identity and voice, and invite the voices of others (Smith & Berg, 1987).

Many adult learning groups struggle with the difficult tensions inherent in moving to more collaborative relationships. The technical limitations of online environments, with its limited nonverbal cues and lack of spontaneity can potentially contribute to learners' ambivalence (Dirkx & Smith, in press; Ragoonaden & Bordeleau, 2000) about group work. This study sought to develop a better understanding of the emotional dynamics associated with these tensions, and how groups manage these dynamics. We wanted to understand how adult learners so often become lost in what must seem like familiar places.

Methodology

A sixteen-week online graduate course in education, fashioned around the principles of collaborative and problem-based learning (Barrows, 1994), was selected for study. Twenty-five of twenty-six students agreed to participate, representing a wide diversity of culture, race, gender, professional experience, and backgrounds. Primary data sources included in-depth interviews with participants, archived records of discussion boards and chat rooms, journals kept by each student, and reflective papers written at the conclusion of each of three problem units. Data were subjected to constant comparative analyses.

Findings

The adult learners in this study demonstrated a profound ambivalence towards online group learning, manifest in alternating swings between periods of closeness with the group and periods in which they moved away from the group toward individual activity. Sophia captured their feelings: "The experience itself is a mixed bag, and there are positives and negatives. Sometimes I was really frustrated. It would be so much easier if I could just do this myself. And then other times I was like this is so good, I'm really glad that everyone is here and I don't have to do this all myself. It just really depended upon the day and where we were at." As the online groups initially formed, they were immediately confronted with the task of establishing a sense of belonging. The initial meeting symbolically began when one of the group members posted a message to the discussion board. For example, a student typically began the initial meeting by indicating that they were online and participating. One learner indicated that she looked forward to working with the others, and then posted a reaction to the group's assigned task. Other members posted similar messages. The tone of interaction was polite, conformity was high, and there was relatively little desire to stick out among one's peers. In one form or another, most expressed hope that their group would be a good one. With these first interactions, however, they brought some anxiety and uncertainty about the whole process. For example, Ginger wrote in her journal: "Not sure how this is all going to work via e-mail and chat room. Group is difficult at best in person. I guess I'll see. I look forward to getting started with my group."

As the groups continued to work together, they enjoyed their ability to brainstorm ideas related to the problem, the readings, and the direction or solution for the group product. As this process continued, however, they became increasingly uncomfortable. In her journal, Chris wrote, "OH MY GOSH! Talk about frustrating. . . . We weren't on the same page. . . . Everyone just threw their ideas out there. Initial illusions of unity were quickly dispelled and they decided to make individual assignments, taking comfort in the individual assignments given to them to work on before the next meeting.

In virtually every group, members attended to their individual sections and reported back so that the group could decide what to do with their contribution. In a chat room, Lisa reported to her group members, "I have five pages written so far. . . . I basically define the problem and laid ground work." These interactions allowed individual members to reconnect with others in their group by posting what they had learned regarding their assigned area. In some groups, members responded with suggestions to the postings of others, while in other groups postings often went unacknowledged.

As they moved toward each other, discussing their findings, making suggestions regarding future directions for the group, and critiquing one another's work, however, tension again became evident within the groups. For the most part their conversations continued to be collegial, but several members noted in their journals their frustration with the process. For example, Lisa wrote, "My group is working on conceptualizing problem #1. I think everyone is frustrated given the fact neither of us (there were actually three members in this group) have ever written a paper before. . . . Autumn and I seemed to be bickering back and forth with each other." Rather than working through the problems before the group, they again chose to create individual responsibilities and tasks and then concluded the meeting.

As the groups created their final reports on the problem, they experienced considerable conflict. To produce this report, the groups had to make collective decisions its content before submitting it for critique by the instructor. The need to eventually complete the group product and spend less time and emphasis on individual interests, however, evoked an increased sense of

emotionality. Autumn wrote, "This journey is like a tornado. . . . There's the whirling wind as you try and connect all the different thoughts, the calm before the storm, which is the lack of activity before the final week of flurry and then all the character references." Although a couple groups wrote their papers together, most groups simply accepted sections of the report written by individual members and attempted to blend these individual contributions, resulting in a quilt-like appearance to the final product. Tatiana astutely noted: "We weren't really collaborating." During the debriefing and reflection period, however, members noted the ways in which they failed to work as a group, concluded that they can work together better, and vowed to do better next time. Like a coach on the sidelines, Nard commented to her group : "We can do this!"

Among the groups observed in this study, this pattern of approach and avoidance repeated itself several times throughout the work on a given case. This cyclical process and its associated issues were repeated with relatively little variation for all three problems the groups addressed in the span of the 16-week course.

Discussion and Implications

We might regard this cyclical process as the group's struggle to adapt to its outer reality demands. We do not discount this reality orientation as a way of making sense of this process. After all, the process kept the groups together and they all completed their assigned tasks, albeit in a manner that was not as effective as it could be. However, the fact that this process was repeated for all three problems the groups addressed in this course indicates an underlying emotional dynamic that was played out through this adaptive process. We argue that this cyclical process represents alternating fears within the groups of fusion and alienation, made more explicit in this study through the absence of a traditional teacher role and authority structures.

Although the group's strategy of dividing up the work might be an effective strategy to address the assigned task, it also symbolically represents an emotional response to the group formative processes and the potential of the group to stifle a sense of individual voice and identity; that is, it represents a response to a perceived fear of fusion. The concept of individuality seemed tightly bound with a sense of voice. It is as though a loss of voice was felt like a loss of individuality. In an instance where Janis perceived her voice was not valued, she lamented, "I felt left in the cold . . . non-existent." Working on their own, they were able to give expression to their own understanding of the task and of their sense of who they were as persons.

Working on their own, however, appears to have fostered a growing sense of alienation and disconnectedness from the group. Although tentative and ambivalent, their actions to re-establish relationships with one another suggest that the group-as-a-whole becomes uncomfortable with the lack of interaction and connection. Through the postings, they sought to create a common ground and re-commit to a sense of belonging. As they proceeded with this process, however, concern for their sense of identity and individuality re-surfaced, causing increased discomfort and emotion with the process. The individualist production of the final report seemed to create a sense of distance among group members. The debriefing process suggested the need to pull together again as a group in the face of a growing fear of alienation.

Thus, the challenges of authority and intimacy in collaborative learning are associated with two fears that are diametrically opposed but inherently inter-related. In order for the group to develop a sense of authority, group members must foster the authority of themselves and each other. To do so fosters work of the group and reinforces the sense of voice and identity but it also raises powerful fears within the group of alienation and estrangement (Gibbard, 1974; Hartman & Gibbard, 1974). As these fears mount within the group, they reinforce desires for

belonging and taking care of others, and groups will direct their attention more to the emotional or relationship issues of the group. Doing so helps alleviate fears of alienation but begins to surface fears of fusion, of loss of individuality and sense of voice. As emotions associated with these fears become more palpable, the group will again begin to reinvest itself with authorship and productivity of the group.

Although these dynamics might seem like an endless, vicious cycle of back and forth movement, the overall process reflects alternating swings of movement between the boundaries of the individual and the group. In healthy, maturing groups, these dynamics contribute to individuation and the emergence of a sense of intersubjectivity (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Bion, 1961; Gibbard, 1974; Smith & Berg, 1987). This process stresses the identity of individuals as group members and awareness of what that implies for their lives in the group. Although we observed relatively little sense of intersubjectivity and interdependence, there is evidence that several learners used this process to re-work their sense of identity as a group member.   For example, Sophia concluded: "I feel myself changing in group settings."

The groups observed in this study, however, seem stuck, caught in a cyclical, paradoxical process that must have seemed like a bad dream. The participants were unable to move out of the paradox because of the way they framed the situation. Each time they moved toward one end of the paradox, they were emotionally pulled back by the power of the other end. Rather than staying with the contradiction and working through the conflict, the members resorted to strategies that moved them toward one end of the pole or another. They completed the work, but the process left them feeling as if there was much to their process that was unfinished.

Helping groups work through these difficult processes becomes a considerable challenge for online instructors. They need to know both how to shift their roles to that of facilitator or coach to foster the reworking of identity and to intervene to alleviate the unsafe spaces generated by the coping strategies that groups sometimes adopt to manage the high levels of emotionality associated with this process. Teachers need to distinguish between responses that may signal barriers to development and responses that signal normal group development (Miller, Trimbur, & Wilkes, 1994). The instructor or leader should make use of specific interventions that help the group become more aware of the underlying issues and their influence on the group. Teachers skilled in these interventions may be better able to help online consensus groups through some of the difficulties observed in this study (Smith & Berg, 1987; Wells, 1990)

Finally, the findings suggest that inattention to these interpersonal issues could defeat both the cognitive and democratic intentions of small online collaborative group learning. Further work is needed to understand how the instructor's role, group composition and grading policies might also influence the group's progress toward individuation and the unsafe spaces that are created during the process. We might suggest the aim of such facilitation is to enable group members to feel familiar with being lost, and to appreciate its potentially educative value.

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Regina O. Smith, Portland State University, Department of Educational Policy, Foundations and
      Administrative Studies, P.O. Box 751, Portland, OR 92707; smithro@pdx.edu

John M. Dirkx, Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education, Michigan State University, 419 EH East
      Lansing, MI 48824; dirkx@msu.edu