Trust in Online Collaborative Groups - A Constructivist Psychodynamic View

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Abstract: Open and sustained discussions within diverse collaborative online groups should provide opportunities for adults to reshape their thinking, deeply understand the subject content, have their voices heard and respected, and expand their epistemic development. These possibilities turn on issues of trust among the group members; the ability to trust differences and epistemic concerns. That is, the ability to trust thoughts that are different from our own is influenced by the learners’ ability to be open about their beliefs and to develop healthy self-other relationships within their small groups. Additionally, the ability to collaborate may present epistemic challenges for the students and hinder their capacity to trust their own and their fellow students’ ability to help them learn and hinder the capacity of the group-as-a-whole to grow and develop. This paper discusses previous research (Smith, 2008; 2009) results demonstrate that student groups use various pathological defense strategies to avoid the types of discussion necessary to fully engage in the difference as well as explore their epistemic concerns. These issues become trust issues for the group-as-a-whole to resolve, which it fails to do. Implications for adult and continuing education are discussed.

Introduction

Although trust represents one of the most critical issues facing online groups, the need to work with others through the text-based online environment can make trust issues more salient. Nevertheless, the research on trust in the online collaborative educational group (OCG) yields contradictory results, which leaves educators with many unanswered questions about how to help identify and facilitate trust issues in these groups. For example, the often recommended social measures, such as team building exercises and communication tools, that are designed to facilitate a successful learning environment, decrease (Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples, 2004) or increase (Walther & Brunz, 2000) trust in the OGC. Similarly, high communication levels has positive (Jarvenpaa, et. al., 1998; Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2007) negative (Jarvenpaa, et. al., 2004), and no significant effects on trust (Jarvenpaa, Shaw, & Staples, 2004). Adult educators are left with unclear directions about how to recognize and facilitate trust issues as they arise in the online collaborative group.

Many scholars such as Dirks and Ferrin’s (2001) who research trust assume a certain direct rational and conscious relationship between a person’s perceptions and the other person’s behavior. Dirks and Ferrin contend that this direct trust model work is more appropriate for structured settings. A strongly structured situation has clear processes to produce outcomes with little ambiguity and uncertainty. Individuals assess low trust risks in these situations and are able to act in trusting ways. Moderate trust models, the second part of Dirks and Ferrin’s model assumes that trust provides conditions under which outcomes such as cooperation and high performance are likely to occur, but assumes no direct relationship. This model takes a psychological approach to trust; individuals rely on past personal and professional trust
experiences to assess trust risks in the current situation. The moderate models are best for weak structures with high ambiguity and uncertainty such as those found in the OCG. The weak structure forces the person to immediately attend to the task and leaves little time to assess trust risks. The person is thus left to rely on their past perceptions of trust. These issues are important for collaborative heterogeneous work. Nevertheless the moderate trust models focus narrowly on the individual, thus it ignores the paradoxical, emotional, and unconscious issues related to trust in the OCG (Smith 2008; 2009).

Smith (2008; 2009) found that trust issues are group level issues around fear of differences and epistemic challenges that are highly emotional, paradoxical and unconscious. Thus failure to work with a more complete picture of trust issues leaves adult educators vulnerable to unwittingly take actions that destroy the group processes and thus, the merits of collaborative learning. Using the online group as the unit of analysis this paper demonstrates how trust is paradoxical and related to the nature of the collaborative group even before individuals enter the group. These issues surface continually throughout the life of the group and become both individual and group trust concerns. The (Kegan, 1982; 1994; Ringer, 2002; Smith & Berg, 1987, Stapley, 2006) help to highlight these issues. The paper ends with a discussion on ways adult educators can understand ways to best understand and facilitate trust issues in these groups.

Conceptual Framework

Collaborative learning as used in this work is defined as a process by which small, heterogeneous, and interdependent learner groups co-construct knowledge ( to achieve consensus and share classroom authority (Bruffee, 1999). The heterogeneous groups confront complex, real-life situations that are messy, ill-structure and have no clear resolution or right answer (Bruffee, 1999). The goal of group work is to shift the locus of control in the classroom from the teacher to the student peer groups (Bruffee, 1999). Learners are entrusted with the ability to govern themselves, in order to help them acknowledge dissent and disagreement, and cope with differences (Bruffee, 1999; Flannery, 1994).

While collaborative learning groups also make heavy use of subject matter, they are more interested in using this information to help address the assigned problem, rather than to facilitate mastery of it among individual learners. As students work in small heterogeneous groups, they learn both the subject matter content, appropriate problem-solving and critical thinking skills, and the skills necessary to work together collaboratively (Bruffee, 1999; Flannery 1994). Students are considered co-constructors of knowledge (Bruffee, 1999), rather than consumers.

Consensus is critical to the process (Bruffee, 1999), because it is only through consensus that the group members are required to listen, hear, understand, and finally accept the view point of fellow group members. When students are forced, through dialogue and deliberation, to come to consensus, they must work harder to consider all viewpoints, in order to reach agreement (Flannery, 1994). As students engage in the necessary group work, it is necessary for the groups to embrace difficult, paradoxical issues that pull them in opposite and often contradictory directions (Smith & Berg, 1987). For example, the ability to openly share information with the group requires learners to expose aspects of the self: that is, their strengths and weaknesses and hopes and fears (Smith & Berg, 1997) at a time when they are not sure that they can trust the members of the group with their thoughts. The process of learning to work through these difficulties is made more complex by the variety of differences that characterize group members.
In an environment that relies on the social construction of knowledge, individual differences, such as cognitive (Shelley & Shelley, 2004) and epistemic development (Schommer, 1998), psychosocial development (Erickson, 1963), race, gender, national origin, age, and prior knowledge and experience, can contribute to widely differing world views, frames of reference, values, and beliefs. Developing interdependency means learning to work with and across these differences, a challenge recognized at virtually all levels of education. Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt, and Camerer (1998) state that trust usually involves the ability to accept vulnerability based on the belief that another’s intentions and behaviors will be positive. According to these authors, trust becomes especially problematic when the trusting party must take risks to work interdependently with other people.

In collaborative learning, students call into question, through self-reflection or self-critique, the assumptions, values, beliefs, symbols, and rules of conduct that characterize their existing ways of meaning making. Learning collaboratively can also involve a dramatic shift in one’s views of teaching and learning. Central to this shift are changing perspectives on the nature of knowledge and roles of the teacher and one’s peers in the learning process. Collaborative learning in which students share classroom authority and co-construct knowledge requires students to operate from a more advanced epistemological development. Much of the literature on epistemological development assumes a linear progression to epistemic development. For example, Perry (1970) asserts individuals evolve through predictable stages, which represents changes to ones’ epistemological development.

From the constructive-developmental perspectives (Kegan, 1982; 1994), ideally epistemological development should result in self-authorship, the ability to see oneself as an active creator of knowledge, and to distinguish one’s own thoughts and feelings from those of others. Self-authorship is needed to work in the heterogeneous consensus collaborative group. According to Piaget (1950), humans move through significant differences in their organizing structures (assumptions) regarding knowledge and learning, which they use to make meaning of their learning experiences. During early stages, learners view the teacher as the transmitter of knowledge and themselves as passive recipient of the teacher’s knowledge. The ability to evaluate differing points of few is limited.

Perry (1970) assert these meaning-making structures evolve through predictable stages, which represents changes to ones’ assumptions about knowledge and learning (epistemological beliefs). According to Perry and other scholars e.g. (Kegan, 1982, 1994), individuals in early stages of epistemological development have simple, dichotomous views about knowledge. Epistemological development represents movement toward more complex views about knowledge, a focus on the evaluation of different points of view, and the ability to perceive oneself as a knowledge creator. This more advanced epistemological development is characteristic of self-authorship.

These processes often challenge pre-existing epistemic assumptions and engender group processes that potentially evoke powerful emotions among group members that, until recently, have been virtually ignored in much of the trust literature on the OCG. Kegan (1982, 1994) who asserts that movement from simplistic epistemic assumptions to self-authorship is very emotionally laden. Learners, who confront collaborative learning that requires them to learn the content among peers without traditional instruction, may experience an imbalance between their beliefs and the demands of new learning expectations (Kegan 1982, 1994). Trust issues around ability may be heightened. Learners in earlier stages of epistemological development are unsure of their own ability to co-construct knowledge, have limited ability to shift through different
perspectives that their heterogeneous groups represent, and they are unsure if the group can meet their learning needs. Trust in this case has little to do with individual group member behaviour, but may reflect underlying epistemic issues that the learners import into the group.

Furthermore, the ability to resolve ill-structured problems is also characterized as a developmental process (King & Kitchner, 1983; 1994) that leads to epistemic cognition ‘the ability to understand the nature of ill-structured problems and to construct solutions to them’ (King & Kitchner, 2002: 38). These authors characterize the developmental movement from a pre-reflective ways of reasoning about ill-structured problems to epistemic cognition. In the prereflective stage, individuals believe that the knowledge to solve problems come from experts who have the right answers. Individuals in the more advanced stages called epistemic cognition understand that real world problems may not have simplistic or right and wrong answers. Furthermore, people with epistemic cognition accept that they have the ability to solve the ill-structured problems and do not need to rely on experts.

Yet, the imbalance between current beliefs and course demands (collaborative learning) can create a strong emotional need that becomes so powerful that the learner is forced to retreat and re-examine their meaning making structures and thus encounter developmental opportunities. Working through these emotionally-laden tensions is often influenced by unconscious forces both within individuals and the group-as-a-whole (Ringer, 2002; Smith & Berg, 1987, Stapley, 2006). While the individual members retreat because they are unsure that it is safe to collaborate, the group-as-a-whole needs them to risk to trust and engage the collaborative process.

The inability to take the risk to trust the collaborative process is also mediated by self-other relationships. Researchers e.g. (Ringer, 2002; Smith & Berg, 1987; Stapley, 2006) explain that individuals with ill-developed and ill-differentiated self-other relationships respond to risks such as trusting, with harmful ego defenses such as splitting, projecting, and blaming. The presence of the harmful ego defenses places the focus on trust rather than the underlying issues that the members import into the group such as fear of exposure, having their contributions to the group product deleted, fear that they will not learn without traditional instruction, and fear of abandonment when the group does not seem to include them. These defensive mechanisms circumvented the collaborative process in the online groups. The focus on trust rather than the underlying intimacy and epistemic issues threw the groups-as-a-whole into the trust paradox with little hope to move forward.

Smith and Berg characterize the paradox of trust as a ‘conundrum of a cycle that depends upon itself to get started’ (p. 115). The ability to trust depends upon the pre-existence of trust. The paradox represents a powerful push and pull struggle between the group-as-a-whole and the individual members. The group-as-a-whole exerts unconscious pressures on the individual to take the risk to trust and engage the collaborative process. Individuals in early stages of epistemological development are not only unsure that they can do so, but are also unsure of their group members’ ability to help them.

These important developmental and group dynamic issues exaggerate the challenges that adult learners face in their small online groups (Smith, 2008; 2009) as well as opportunities for individuals to confront and work on self-other relationships (Smith & Berg, 1987, Ringer 2002) through the exploration of trust related fears. Smith and Berg (1987) explain that by living with apparent contradictions and shifting the focus from the idea of trust to the process of trusting, learners can work through their fear, seek to connect more deeply with other group members, and achieve a more developed sense of self within the group.
When the problem is framed in this manner, it is relatively easy to understand why so many online learning groups end up being dominated by a few voices, with other members simply offering the path of least resistance. Students settle for surface learning reflecting a failure of collaborative learning (Bruffee, 1999). A collaborative approach to learning is not primarily about a technique or method for accomplishing a learning task. Rather, collaborative learning represents a process of meaning-making and initiation into a community of scholars, a form of deep learning (Weigel, 2004). To the extent that individuals within the group do not or cannot experience the joys and struggles associated with this process, they fall short of what it means to engage in collaborative inquiry (Bruffee, 1999).

**Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendation**

Smith (2008; 2009) concluded that many of the online groups in her study failed to engage in conversations that would allow them to derive the benefits of collaborative learning because they were unable to trust one another and move toward understanding differing opinions, behavior epistemic challenges prevented them from trusting the collaborative process. Although, these issues persisted throughout the semester, a few groups were able to end the trust paradox when they finally stopped focusing on trust and began to discuss their fears. Others were able to move out of the paradox when they began to see that the collaborative process was actually working.

Smith (2008; 2009) suggests three implications for adult educators. The instructor must develop the capacity to identity and hold in consciousness apparent contradictory and paradoxical group movement regarding trust (Smith & Berg, 1987). When instructors intervene, they need to place as much focus on the group process as the course content. Second, instructors must understand the group-as-a-whole process. Smith and Berg contend that when members explore the underlying fears that cause the tension, opportunities group individuation remains possible. Educators therefore need to encourage and nurture this process. Instructors thus need to be very careful that their interventions to help the group deal with their conflict do not interfere with this process. Many instructors try to resolve conflicts with rational conflict resolution techniques, which may prove inadequate and serve to deepen the paradox.

Third, on the one hand the students reveal that the ability to have meaningful engagement about conflict issues via CMC is diminished. On the one other hand one could view this perspective as defensive behavior that allows the groups to blame the computer for their failure to have meaningful; conversations about their blaming behavior. Additionally, the lack of visual cues allowed the participants to hide their true feelings, which may have allowed more ego defense behavior. The defensive strategies such as denial, withdrawing (little participation), splitting and projecting, engaging in fantasies such as threats to leave the group and go to one that did not have the same issues are both adaptive and destructive. When used as adaptively, the group-as-a-whole serves as a container or holding environment for the defensive behavior until the member can make more rational assessments of their situation. In this way the group-as-a-whole can help the groups manage their fears. When used inappropriately the defensive behavior becomes destructive and serves to diminish effective communication about significant issues such as trust and the ensuing conflict.

Further research is needed on the ways in which the online environment helps or hinders the group development process through the use of adaptive and/or destructive defense mechanisms.
References


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