STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL TASK DEVELOPMENT IN ONLINE GROUP PROJECT WORK

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This article explores student perceptions of social task development in an online group project and poses recommendations for implementation of group projects. Qualitative methods were used to analyze student perceptions of social task development in online group project. Respect, "being nice," follow the rules/follow the leader, communication, and defined roles and expectations emerged as ways in which social tasks were carried out in an online group setting. Specific desired characteristics of group members were also identified. Instructors in online classes can build on this awareness by providing guidelines and tasks to support behaviors that enhance social task development.

Group projects have been identified as effective strategies in the delivery of online classes (Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Williams, 2002). Activities that promote active learning in an online setting, such as group projects, are believed to contribute to positive learning outcomes (Rovai & Barnum, 2003). However, working as a group in an online setting may pose unique challenges (Hewson & Hughes, 2005) and frustrations (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). A better understanding of how to facilitate successful online group interactions can assist instructors in supporting optimal student learning. Social tasks such as making oneself known, developing an identity within the group, getting to know others, discovering and contributing to the communication etiquette of the group, and developing supportive and trusting relationships within the group are believed to be important contributors to the formation, development, and success of online groups (Hewson & Hughes).

Making oneself known and getting to know others are important aspects of building relationships and can be viewed as an important first step in the formation and development of online groups (Molinari, 2004). Online students use specific strategies to get to know oth-

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The Quarterly Review of Distance Education, Volume 10(3), 2009, pp. 285–294 ISSN 1528-3518

ers and make themselves known: self-revelation and "tying" (acknowledging others and making a connection). Examples of these strategies include giving advice, answering or asking personal questions, providing apologies, excuses, or explanations; making statements of an emotional or social nature (including the use of fonts or emoticons), comments regarding "place" or where one lives, providing approval or validation, addressing individuals by name, showing agreement or disagreement, and the use of "soothing" statements to diffuse difficult situations or disagreements (Molinari).

Development of an identity within the group, or self presentation, is also believed to contribute to successful group interactions. Self presentation in online learning communities allows individuals to develop an identity within a group. Students present themselves to one another and follow specific scripts that fit their sense of self and the situation, although students may struggle as they work to determine which script they should use. Self-presentation in an online setting allows for individuals to be selective in how they present themselves in different settings; this is particularly advantageous in modalities that are asynchronous (Tu & Corry, 2001). In an online setting, tools are available that can enhance presentation of information about one's self (i.e., online profiles or introductions) and these tools may be more in-depth than those that occur in a face-to-face setting. These tools are also more "permanent" than many face-to-face introductions. On the other hand, tools such as visual cues are lacking (Hewson & Hughes, 2005).

Another key aspect of successful group work is the establishment of norms, including etiquette (Pankoke-Babatz & Jeffrey, 2002; Tu & Corry, 2001). Reviews of the literature indicate that knowledge of the norms of a specific group provides members with a sense of belonging, which may facilitate cooperation and regulate behavior by letting others know what is or is not appropriate (Pankoke-Babatz & Jeffery). These rules can be formal or informal, but serve an important role in regulating interactions by addressing behaviors that are desired or undesired, and the consequences for breaking the rules. Etiquette strategies may also emerge after group members have begun to develop working relationships and provide a mechanism through which relationships are maintained (Molinari, 2004). For example, Vinagre's (2008) research on e-mail exchanges in group work found that students make frequent use of "positive politeness strategies" in their initial contacts with an unknown team member.

Developing supportive relationships with other group members, including developing a sense of trust, has been found to be related to group success (Finegold & Cooke, 2006). Development of trust in the online environment, however, can take more time than in the face-to-face classroom (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Lack of trust may prevent other beneficial social interactions from occurring (Tu & McIsaac) and students may struggle as they work to determine who is trustworthy. Along with trustworthiness, other individual characteristics such as decision-making skills, consensus building, collegiality, active participation, and conflict resolution are valued by students engaged in online group work (Finegold & Cooke, 2006). Students in online settings may look for these traits or skills in their fellow group members as they work towards developing familiarity and supportive relationships.

As discussed above, social tasks such as making oneself known, developing an identity within the group, getting to know others, discovering and contributing to communication etiquette of the group, and developing supportive and trusting relationships within the group are important contributors to the online group process. Yet, how these tasks are perceived and evidenced by students in an online setting is not well understood. Understanding how social tasks evolve in an online setting may be particularly important due to the unique challenges of online communication including a lack of social cues (Hacker & Nie-

derhauser, 2000), limitations in students' understanding of social rules and norms for interaction in an online environment (Pankoke-Babatz & Jeffrey, 2002), and limited technological tools for educators to support the development of group dynamics in the online classroom (Hewson & Hughes, 2005). Furthermore, students may not understand and appreciate the nature of social task development and the role of social task in contributing to successful group dynamics (Cameron, Morgan, Williams, & Kostelecky, 2009). A better understanding of student perceptions of the processes of social task development in online group projects would allow faculty to design protocols to support social task development in online groups.

The need for further understanding of the dynamics of online group processes has been noted by others (Conrad, 2002; Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007), and in particular, the need for qualitative work exploring student perspectives regarding the online group experience (Conrad, 2002; Finegold & Cooke, 2006). This call for further exploration of this topic is rooted in the assumptions posed by proponents of constructivist theory who posit that knowledge is constructed through interactions with one's environment (Rovai, 2004). The learner is actively engaged in processing information; it is through this active process that an understanding or awareness of the world is developed. Instructors who choose to integrate constructivist theory into their classroom strive to provide structured learning environments that promote the understanding of multiple perspectives and viewpoints (Bednar, Cunningham, Duffy, & Perry, 1992). In an online setting, one way in which these goals can be achieved is through group interactions, including group projects. However, in order to maximize the online learning environment and truly integrate the maxims of constructivist theory, knowledge regarding successful group interactions is needed.

This project contributes to the growing literature on online group processes by using a qualitative protocol to look at one facet of online groups: social task development. Implications for effective implementation of group projects in an online classroom based on the results of our study will also be presented.

METHODOLOGY

Procedure

Data for this study were collected during the pilot phase of an online survey (Cameron et al., 2009). The goal of the survey was to assess student perceptions of social task development in online group projects. The survey tool included both open- and closed-ended questions assessing social tasks discussed by Hewson & Hughes (2005): making oneself known, developing an identity within the group, getting to know others, discovering and contributing to the communication etiquette of the group, and developing supportive and trusting relationships within the group. These social tasks are believed to play a key role in the success of online group work. This article will focus on analysis of the student responses to the open-ended questions. The open-ended questions were included in the study to help further explore student perceptions of social tasks proposed by Hewson and Hughes. The wording of the open-ended questions reflects each of these social tasks. The questions are as follows:

- How did you help other online group members to get to know you?
- How did you work to develop a specific identity as a member of your online group?
- How did you get to know your online group?
- What kinds of characteristics did you look for in others in your online group?
- How did you discover group etiquette in your online group?
- How did you contribute to group etiquette in your online group?

- How did you develop supportive relationships in your online group?
- How did you develop a sense of trust in your online group?

The survey was deployed to 125 undergraduate students in a Department of Family and Consumer Sciences. Purposeful sampling was used to select participants for this study (Creswell, 2007). Six courses were specifically targeted for inclusion in the study based on two criteria: the courses offered a group project that was to be completed using the tools available within the course shell, and the course was offered in an exclusively online format. Tools available in the course shell included both synchronous and asynchronous tools: chat rooms, threaded discussions, and document sharing. The survey response rate was 47%.

Analysis

Student responses to the eight open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively. Comments were read and discussed by the three investigators to develop codes and to provide data triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Comments were then re-read by all three authors as a group to confirm appropriateness of codes, clarify code definitions, and develop themes based on the coded data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Participants in the survey were predominantly female (93%) and Caucasian (90%). The average age of participants was 29 years, and the range was from 19 to 62 years of age. Slightly more of the students (55%) were "distance" students, meaning that they were enrolled in one of the University's majors that are offered exclusively online.

Six themes emerged from the analysis of students' responses to questions regarding social task development. The themes that emerged were respect, "be nice," follow the rules/follow the leader, communication is key, define roles and expectations, and desired characteristics of group members.

Respect

Students indicated their awareness of multiple viewpoints and the importance of respecting one another as an essential piece of effective group work. This concept is illustrated by quotes such as, "I always treated the group with respect, and made the project a priority," "[I contributed by] being respectful of each other and listening to each other," and "I wanted them to respect me so I had to respect them."

Students used the term "respect" in their responses to many of the open-ended questions, as well as described other behaviors that can be interpreted as respect. However, when the term "respect" was used, it was not described further. Comments such as "I wanted them to respect me so I had to respect them" are open to interpretation, and the actual behaviors used when showing, or being shown respect, are not understood. However, the issue of respect and the need for students to respect the contributions of each other has been noted as a key component of successful online work by others (Finegold & Cooke, 2006; Hewson & Hughes, 2005).

"Be Nice"

The theme "be nice" refers to behaviors that were used to maintain a positive environment. Students were unwilling to challenge group behaviors that were undesirable, preferring instead to avoid conflict. Students also valued the role of politeness and being positive in a group situation. For example, one student responded as follows: "I tried being nice to everyone, and making everyone feel like their work was really good." Another student explained that "A friendly etiquette was very important. Despite what you may be feeling, you benefit most from being as positive as possible in a group situation. Negativity and put-

downs only slow the process down and create unwanted animosity."

The emphasis on "being nice" may reflect cultural norms as well as a recognition of the unique nature and challenges of online communication. Communication in online settings can be challenging due to the lack of social cues (Hacker & Niederhauser, 2000) and lack of synchronous communication. Rules of etiquette in online settings have been evolving over the years (Pankoke-Babatz & Jeffrey, 2002), and the experienced online students in our class may have developed a more keen awareness of the need to overcompensate for the lack of social cues by being "extra" polite, avoiding conflict, and focusing on maintaining positive relationships. Others have noted efforts made by online learners to "maintain equilibrium and harmony" within their learning communities (Conrad, 2002) and to use specific etiquette strategies as a means to develop and maintain an online group (Molinari, 2004).

The "be nice" theme noted in this study supports the work of Vinagre (2008) who reported a high use of positive politeness strategies in e-mail exchanges between students working on a collaborative project. The role of gender may also be reflected in the comments of the students. The majority of the participants in our study were women. Current reviews of research and theory support the notion that gender identity shapes how individuals behave in social interactions and develop or manage their social relations, including those that take place in online settings (Fauske & Wade, 2003-2004). Women may use language to maintain and foster a sense of relationship (Tannen, 1990) and connection with others in their learning environment (Rovai, 2002). It is not necessarily the case that women are more "polite" than men; rather, gender plays a role in the way that language is used within specific contexts (Mills, 2005). Therefore, the strategies used by participants in our study may be reflective of their gender.

Follow the Rules/Follow the Leader

Students saw that it was important to follow the rules established by the instructor in their syllabus, but also felt that group members should follow the others' expectations. Some of these rules were visible, as this quote indicates: "There were a clear set of rules/etiquette established prior to any group project. More rules/guidelines were given when placed in a group setting." Other rules were less visible, as explained by this student: "I tried to follow others' leads and tried to do as much as I possibly could to contribute."

This theme represents two distinct aspects of leading and rules in an online group setting. One addresses the felt importance of following the rules of the assignment, whether they are clearly set or not. Assignment rules and guidelines provide a useful focal point for group work, and by referring to rules, students can oftentimes deflect conflict or arguments. The other aspect of this theme is that of following the leader of the group. In these particular classes, there was not a designated group "leader" that was formally assigned by the instructor. Rather, this role emerged as part of the group process, as did the role of the follower. This aspect of the theme is critical—not only is leadership important, but the role of individuals as followers of leaders is equally important. Students may struggle as they negotiate these rules, taking away from other more important group process tasks.

Others have discussed the issue of group rules specifically set by an instructor (Morgan, 2006) or by group members (Finegold & Cooke, 2006); however, this issue did not emerge as relevant for this group of students. Students did feel it was important to follow the rules for the assignment set by the instructor, but the issue of setting rules for the group by the group members was not seen as important. Others report that students do not think it is necessary to set rules for how and when to communicate; rather, students assume that others will behave appropriately for the setting and task (Finegold & Cooke).

Communication is Key

Students indicated that it was important that other members of the group participated in the threads or chats as part of the planning process, and be sensitive to others' opinions and input. Active communication appeared to be a key component of this process, as indicated by the following quotes: "I would try to communicate with each member and get everyone's input" and "I asked questions about how everyone thought the project should go and based my expectations on their responses."

Active participation has been noted as a key component of successful online groups (Finegold & Cooke, 2006). Communication is the means through which working relationships are developed, group processes are discovered, and assignments are deconstructed (Molinari, 2004). Means of communicating are limited in an online setting, making it all the more critical for quality communication to be facilitated for effective group outcomes to occur.

Define Roles and Expectations

Student comments showed that roles within the group often emerged rather than being assigned; roles also shifted during the project. The process through which this occurred is illustrated in the following quote:

> If they say that they are going to do a part and they don't do it or they just don't check in with the group then I know that it is left to the others in the group to pick up the slack.

The evolving process of roles and lack of hierarchy within online groups has been noted by other researchers (Finegold & Cooke, 2006). In our study, assigned roles were not required in any of the group projects, and only one class provided specific information on group roles. Yet, the topic of roles came up both directly as indicated by this quote: "I took a leadership role in organizing roles and deadlines and worked as a facilitator for group communication" and indirectly, as seen in the quote cited earlier.

Roles in a group may be better understood by some students than by others; some students may not be aware of the benefits of assigning specific roles within a group or they may not realize the types of roles that can be assigned. Lack of basic group work skills may be a significant problem for some online learners (Roberts & McInnerney, 2007).

Desired Characteristics of Group Members

Analysis of student responses to the open ended question, "What kinds of characteristics did you look for in others in your online group?" allowed the research team to generate a list of commonly used terms. The characteristic mentioned most frequently was work ethic. According to one student, "Work ethic is everything. If you can't rely on someone to get something done because of their poor working skills you don't really want to put your trust in them." Reliability was the next most frequently mentioned characteristic, as noted in this quote: "You need to determine who is reliable and who you need to keep an eye on within the group. But that's not any different from a 'real time' or face to face group." These characteristics may be essential to the development of social tasks proposed by Hewson & Hughes (2005); in particular, developing a sense of trust.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The social tasks of making oneself known to the group, developing an identity within the group, getting to know others in the group, discovering and contributing to the communication etiquette of the group, and developing supportive and trusting relationships within the group have been noted as playing a key role in the development of successful online groups (Hewson & Hughes, 2005). However, little is known about how these social tasks are viewed and carried out by students in online group settings. This study attempted to address this issue

by asking students in several online classes to provide information on how they, and others in their group, carried out these social tasks. Themes that emerged from their responses revealed that respect, "be nice," follow the rules/follow the leader, communication, and defined roles and expectations, were ways in which social tasks were carried out in an online group setting. Specific desired characteristics of group members were also identified.

The results of our study can be used by instructors in online classes to support behaviors that enhance social task development. For groups to be successful, and student learning to be enhanced, students may need assistance. Assisting students in learning about the group process is a key part of achieving success, and supporting optimal learning in an online setting. Students may have a basic understanding of the skills used in a group setting, but may need additional assistance to optimize student learning in online groups or online communities. Faculty members who expect students to participate in group work, yet do so based on assumptions that students have a high level of skills in this area, are doing students a disservice (Roberts & McInnerney, 2007). Specific strategies for supporting students in achieving success in online group learning processes are discussed below.

Showing Respect and "Nice" Behavior Through Ground Rules

Students reported that being positive, friendly, and showing respect were ways in which they contributed to the social task development of their group. This issue is closely related to the concept of etiquette. Instructors may find it helpful to develop a set of "ground rules" regarding general rules of online communication, including what it means to be nice and show respect. Prior to developing such a statement, it may be useful to brainstorm with students what is meant by "respect." Information from this discussion could be used to develop ground rules for group participation. Collaborating with students to develop ground rules can be effective, as it allows students to develop a sense of responsibility and ownership (Fauske & Wade, 2003-2004) and ensure that rules that are set are relevant. An example of ground rules is as follows: *Respect/Course Ground Rules:* please keep in mind the "disconnected" nature of e-mail and chat/threaded discussions. Sometimes our meaning can be lost in what we write. So, it is often best to err on the side of being overly "polite"—using emoticons (☺) for example, can make things seem a lot "softer" sometimes. I ask that we treat each other as we would if we were meeting face to face. If you would not say what you are writing to me (or one of your classmates) in person, don't write it! (Morgan, 2006).

Ground rules may provide guidance and structure and make group norms visible. This may facilitate cooperation (Pankoke-Babatz & Jeffrey, 2002) and enhance the learning experience. Ground rules provide structure for the environment that can allow a range of ideas and points of views to be expressed (Morgan, 2006).

Some have argued that ground rules or standards for interaction are an essential aspect of the online classroom (Fauske & Wade, 2003-2004; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). They believe that having standard ground rules and expectations for communication in place is a critical prerequisite for effective online learning. McInnerney and Roberts propose a very detailed set of communication expectations, for both instructors and students to follow. It is critical that instructors strike a balance in establishing ground rules and address this issue in a way that is consistent with one's teaching philosophy, style, and goals for the learning environment.

Providing Information on Group Work Skills and Roles

Instructors may wish to consider providing information on basic group work skills (Roberts & McInnerney, 2007), including the various roles that group members can play (i.e., leader, editor, rule checker, etc.). It may be

wise to suggest roles that students could take within their groups, but also encourage students to design or assign roles based on their personal experiences with group work (including online group work) and individual strengths and allow students to self-select the role they wish to play. Each group is unique and the group process is an interaction between individual characteristics, experience, and understanding of the assignment (Molinari, 2004). Assigning group roles may not be necessary, or desired by students (Finegold & Cooke, 2006). Providing students with basic skills on group processes, and then allowing them to "jump in" and engage in the learning process on their own, honors a constructivist approach to learning (Williams, 2006).

Supporting Effective Communication

Students in our study noted the importance of active communication and sensitivity to others. Implications for supporting effective communication are interesting to consider. One thought would be to suggest that groups come to a consensus regarding rules for group communication and participation (in addition to the ground rules discussed above). It has been suggested that such rules may focus more specifically on the process versus the content of communication (Finegold & Cooke, 2006; Hewson & Hughes, 2005). On the other hand, students may not think it necessary to set rules for how and when to communicate. They may be comfortable assuming that others will communicate in a way that allows the work to be completed efficiently and effectively (Finegold & Cooke). Again, a balance needs to be made within the classroom context regarding the role of the instructor in supporting or even directing the learning process, as well as the number of "rules" that are in place to govern the learning process. Instructors must also recognize that issues such as sensitivity to others may be more challenging to influence. Introducing basic concepts of online etiquette through ground rules (as discussed earlier) addresses issues of sensitivity at a very simplistic level, but does nothing to address sensitivity issues that may be more complex, hostile, aggressive, or racially charged.

Facilitating Social Task Development

Students may not understand the benefits of developing a community of learners and how this can serve as the foundation for successful learning (Conrad, 2002). In our study, students discussed the need to show respect, be nice, follow the rules and leader of the group, communicate effectively, and define roles and expectations. These themes illustrate how students perceive and evidence the social tasks proposed by Hewson and Hughes (2005): making oneself known, developing an identity within the group, getting to know others, discovering and contributing to the communication etiquette of the group, and developing supportive and trusting relationships within the group. Notably missing were themes related to getting to know others, or making oneself known. Students may assume that they will get to know others, and others will get to know them as the process evolves. Or, it may be that taking time to develop relationships or get to know others, even as it relates to the group project, is superfluous and a waste of time. Students just want to "get to work." Conrad's (2002) work supports this finding as well. Based on the results of our study, there is reason to conclude that instructors may need to provide support at the beginning, or "forming" stage of the group process. The forming stage is a "warm up" period, where students can be encouraged to get to know each other (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). It could be that many of the key issues regarding group formation such trust and respect, could be addressed by helping students to get to know each other before they start their work. This can be done through introduction exercises, as well as small assignments related to the project that allow students to show their work ethic and reliability (characteristics our students said

were most important). The challenge to this recommendation is that many instructors (and student) feel that these sorts of activities are a waste of time (Conrad; Roberts & McInnerney, 2007) and do not recognize the value of time put in at the "front end" to produce a better end result. Instructors may need to be forthright as to why these exercises are required, and also design activities that serve double-duty—they help students get to know each other *and* get the group project work done.

In summary, although the benefits of group projects in the online classroom are well understood, students struggle with the group learning process. The results of our study point to the need for instructors to support students learn how the group process evolves. Instructors can support students by developing ground rules, providing information on group work skills and roles, supporting effective communication, and facilitating social task development.

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