Chapter 16
Mediated Group Development

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on an interpersonal approach to understanding small group development in mediated environments. Whereas much of the literature in this area has emerged in the study of workplace and organizational development, this chapter is grounded in small group development theory and folds in relevant studies of virtual communication in groups. This approach is designed to complement a larger work based in interpersonal communication by providing students of interpersonal communication with a basic introduction to small groups and the impact of communication technology on small group development.

INTRODUCTION

- Three marketing staffers engage in a conference call about ad copy for a product launch.
- A twenty-member interpersonal communication class gathers around a seminar table.
- Twelve avatars study together in a gray stone church in a virtual world.
- A family of five gathers for a mother’s birthday dinner.
- A reporter chats with two news anchors via satellite hologram.

These scenarios deviate from the scope of study in interpersonal communication, not because of their varied uses of technology, but rather because they include too many people.

A dyad of two people becomes something different when a third member is added. Their collective communication changes. Harris and Sherblom (2005) suggest that when members are added to a communication environment, the number of interactions increases exponentially. A dyad in communication shares two possible interactions, one from person A to person B; one from person B to person A. Three people communicating share nine possible interactions. When a group reaches eight people, a
possible 1,016 interactions are available for study. This exponential growth of the possible number of interactions creates a complex environment in which communication can flourish.

The collective study of these interactions, small group and team communication, has been well defined over the last five decades, and its study has been compiled in various textbooks on the subject (e.g., Beebe, Beebe, & Ivy, 2009; Beebe & Masterson, 2006; Engleberg & Wynn, 2007; Harris & Sherblom, 2005; Rothwell, 2006). As part of a greater body of work in this text, this chapter’s main objective is to provide a brief introduction to small group development for people studying interpersonal communication by synthesizing some of the key theories in the study of small group development and folding in a discussion of current technology which impacts this development.

BACKGROUND

Small Groups and Communication

Small groups generally contain at least three, and as many as 20, individuals who are united around a common goal or purpose. These members are involved in a complex set of communication transactions which are shaped by each member of the group. From a systems theory perspective, groups are sets of interrelated, interdependent parts that influence and are influenced by each other. These groups share a common ground, bond, or focus which drive them to achieve a purpose. For this reason, people standing in line at a grocery store would not be considered a group, whereas a group might be found meeting in an online discussion board.

Because groups share a common purpose, communication observed in small groups often consists of one of four types of group communication: task, pattern, process, and self-centered (Harris & Sherblom, 2005; Rothwell, 2006). Task communication relates to the core aims of the group and the content of its work. Consider a study group. Task communication might sound like, “Let’s review interpersonal communication,” or, “Who knows what the Tuckman article was about?” These statements focus on the main content of the group’s goals.

Pattern communication relates to the relationships between group members. In the same study group, pattern communication might sound like, “This is a fantastic group! I know we can knock this out,” or, “Taylor, you make a great leader for our group.” These statements relay information about the relationships between members.

Process communication clarifies procedural elements of the group. In our study group, process communication might include, “Our next meeting will be at six o’clock on Tuesday night,” or, “Heidi, you take chapter three and I’ll take chapter four.” These statements reflect the “how” component of the group’s actions.

Self-centered communication occurs when members of the group talk about things that are off-topic. For example, self-centered communication might occur when a group member says, “I’m really hungry,” or tells a joke.

The four types of communication transactions considered here can be a useful guide for discussing the verbal and nonverbal exchanges that occur in groups, but they do not give the entire story of small group communication. Like communication in interpersonal dyads, small group communication combines a delicate balance of verbal and nonverbal cues with a sense of interdependence. Thus, each member of the group bears some responsibility for the effectiveness of the group’s communication, and the overall communication exhibited occurs on a larger and more complex scale than that of the interpersonal dyad.

As this book has demonstrated, the study of interpersonal communication becomes more complex when communication is mediated by technology. Likewise, technology creates another