Group Process & Trust in Group Discussion

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ABSTRACT

Successful group discussion plays a crucial role in online learning. Teachers normally assume that students automatically transfer their learning of group process from group to group. Our experience found that for group discussion to be effective, it is important that we consider group process and the role of trust within groups. The article begins with an introduction to group process and trust followed by a brief review of the benefits of group discussion for online learning. In the third section, we describe the role that teachers play in initiating environments that promote trust and group empowerment. Through our experience of the implications of group process and trust, we will discuss how this environment fosters trusting relationships. We will also discuss the value of reviewing the group process for each class before assigning group work. The article concludes with the outcomes of our experience and suggestions for further work.

Keywords: distance education; distance learning; group process; online collaboration; trust

INTRODUCTION

Students are taught at a very early age about group process, which includes teaching the importance and value of internalising and distributing roles among the group members to maximise the results of the task. Knowing that group process is taught in a specific grade level, succeeding teachers make assumptions that these students will automatically transfer their skills without first checking with them to learn about what they do remember. Although some groups of students may recall and follow the process as they were instructed, experience shows that most of them do not. More importantly, when most teachers, who are quite experienced
in teaching group process, become learners themselves, they, too, do not automatically follow the procedure of assigning roles to their group members when working in groups.

**Group Process**

Tasks and activities that are performed in a group discussion can be generally known as a process. Group process is a crucial part of computer-supported collaborative work (CSCW) concepts that specify the goals and structure of the team as well as the progress of the co-operation between team members (Borghoff & Schlichter, 2000). According to Borghoff and Schlichter (2000), a group process is the specification of information, activities and characteristics of an electronically supported team, including the context for the group interaction. It usually consists of a static and a dynamic part. The static part describes the team and its environment for performing activities, whereas the dynamic part specifies the progress of the group work and its respective state. The static part of the group process consists of: goals, organisation, protocols and environment of the group. On the other hand, the dynamic part is made up of shared documents, group activities, the current group state and group sessions (Borghoff & Schlichter, 2000).

Group goal describes the global goals to be achieved by a predefined team. Individual goals can differ from group goals. Group goals have priority over individual goals. Group organisation describes team members according to profiles (their skills and competencies) and their position within the team and the organisation in which the team is embedded. The role of the team within the group may depend on their roles within the organisation. It may also change dynamically as the group progresses. There are active and dynamic participants within a group discussion. The group protocol describes the way in which the team members co-operate and communicate with each other. There are two types of protocols, technical and social. A protocol that is based on hardware or software is known as technical social protocol and is controlled by team members. It helps to determine who will determine who will speak during a session. There is a formal and an informal approach to it. In the case of informal protocol each participant can feel free to speak according to predefined rules. In formal protocol a moderator is in charge. Group environment is determined by the context of the group work, such as the hardware and software systems, room equipment and room layout.

Group documents belong to the dynamic part of the group process. They share information and relate to group process. An example is a meeting session. Activities taking place during a group process can have temporal or causal dependencies upon each other. It must be dynamically adaptable to new situations. Borghoff and Schlichter (2000) suggest that a group session is performed as part of a group activity. It can be both synchronous and asynchronous. Participants may include one or, several or all team
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