Chapter VIII

Negotiating Meaning in Virtual Teams:
Context, Roles and Computer Mediated Communication in College Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter is a study of the communication practices of students and their instructors collaborating on virtual team projects as part of small group and team communication classes at three universities — two in the United States, and one in the Philippines. Presented are three themes from student and instructor discourse that emerged as crucial in the development of the teams as they completed the project: negotiation of context, negotiation of roles, and negotiation of technology. The authors hope that attentiveness to these themes by other faculty facilitating virtual team projects in their courses will better equip students to effectively work in virtual teams and lead to greater student learning of the role communication plays in virtual teams. Attentiveness to these themes may also be of use in corporate applied instructional and training situations.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade, a number of universities, especially those in the United States, have begun to experiment with distance learning, with students and instructors based in multiple locations (Contractor, Stohl, Monge, Flanagan, & Fulk, 2000; Yakimovicz & Murphy, 1995). The functional premium placed on virtual teamwork and the increasing popularity of distance-learning-based models of education led to an increased emphasis upon virtual teams in university-level college classrooms. In particular, in an effort to stay current with the operational norms of contemporary organizations, some instructors of small group communication and organizational communication courses are including units on virtual collaboration and organizing virtual team assignments for their students in their courses (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998; Monge, O’Keefe, Stohl, Yammine, & Contractor, 1999).

The increased emphasis upon virtual teams in the workplace and in the university has not gone without its share of criticism. Virtual team-based models of work were criticized for their poorer communication environments and increased potential for miscommunication (Handy, 1995). Distance learning was criticized for the reduced pedagogical opportunities it provides students, as well as its excessive reliance on corporate and entrepreneurial approaches to education (Noble, 2001). Given the increased popularity of virtual teams and distance learning, these attendant critiques make close examinations of virtual team communication crucial, particularly in pedagogical contexts.

Our pedagogical interest in this issue led us toward a research question: What themes in virtual team communication emerge as critical to students’ ability to complete virtual team projects in university classrooms? In answering this question, we used data from our own and our students’ experiences in small group communication classes, where students and instructors from diverse backgrounds and in diverse locations collaborated on course projects. Three themes in our data emerged as crucial in the development of the teams as they completed the project: negotiation of context, negotiation of roles, and negotiation of technology.

We use Bormann’s symbolic convergence theory to understand the importance of these themes, while also drawing on Weick’s work on sense making and organizing to explain team members’ negotiation of roles, and the meanings they assigned to technology. First, we offer a review of the literature related to the themes we identified and the theoretical perspectives that we adopted for this essay. Second, we outline the methodology used in developing this project. Third, we provide an analysis of student and instructor talk from the virtual teams we studied. Finally, we offer recommendations for other instructors who use or are planning to use a virtual team project in the instructional design of their courses.
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