Chapter 12

Learning to Work Virtually: Conversational Repair as a Resource for Norm Development in Computer–Mediated Team Meetings

Kris M. Markman
University of Memphis, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents an analysis of interaction in computer-mediated group meetings. Five undergraduate students used a quasi-synchronous chat interface to conduct four virtual team meetings. Using the framework of conversation analysis, I describe how self-initiated self repair of minor errors such as typos was used by team members as a vehicle for group norm development. The norms for typing style (punctuation, correcting typos and spelling mistakes) vary widely across computer-mediated communication (CMC) contexts. I show how the main function of the repair attempts was not to clarify meaning, but rather to help team members, particularly in their first meeting, work out an agreed-upon set of typing conventions for their subsequent interactions, thus contributing to the development of a norm of informality.

INTRODUCTION

Scholars in a variety of fields, including organizational communication, management, and educational technology, have sought to better understand the obstacles to computer-mediated collaboration and teamwork, and to explain how virtual groups can be used effectively in a variety of contexts. Often this scholarship focuses, directly or indirectly, on the communicative practices of computer-mediated groups, and how these practices relate to factors such as trust, interaction style, conflict management, leadership, relationship building, etc. For example, research has found that computer-mediated communication (CMC) does not present a de facto obstacle to successful group problem solving, and that groups can and do compensate for any limitations imposed by the medium (Potter & Balthazard, 2002). The style of interaction that the group as a whole exhibits, as opposed to the personalities of the individual team members, can predict contextual outcomes in virtual teams (Balthazard, Potter,
Learning to Work Virtually

& Warren, 2004). Positive outcomes in virtual teamwork have also been linked to the presence or development of shared understanding among team members (Majchrzak, Rice, King, Malhotra, & Ba, 2000), as have listening and paying attention (Furst, Blackburn, & Rosen, 1999). Additional research has shown that effective virtual teams are able to fit their communication patterns to the task (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). As a whole, this scholarship points to the need for further examinations of specific communicative practices, particularly as they relate to the development of virtual groups and teams.

This chapter expands the research on computer-mediated group development by taking a different approach, focusing specifically on how conversation in virtual team meetings unfolds. I draw on the methodological tools of conversation analysis (CA) (e.g. Heritage, 1984; Silverman, 1998) to demonstrate empirically how conversational repair can be used as a tool for the development of group norms (Tuckman, 1965). In this context, repair refers to occasions when participants stop the ongoing trajectory of talk to fix troubles in their own or in another participant’s prior turn. Within research on spoken interaction, repair has been shown to be evidence of how participants in conversation achieve intersubjective understanding (Schegloff, 1992, 2000). However, in this chapter I will show that repair can be used for more than fixing misunderstandings, and that, in the course of virtual meetings, it can serve as a resource for team members to test the boundaries of their interaction style.

I begin with a short discussion of norms and computer-mediated group development, followed by a brief review of research on repair in spoken and computer-mediated interaction. I will then present data drawn from a larger case study of conversational structures in virtual team meetings and show how repair is used as a tool during the norming process. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this research for the study of virtual groups and suggestions for future research directions.

BACKGROUND

Norms and Virtual Groups

Group development has been the subject of much research over the last 50 years, with the result being a number of different models that attempt to describe, and sometimes prescribe, the ways that groups form over time (for a review, see Chidambaram & Bostrom, 1996). One of the most prominent models, Tuckman’s (1965) foundational work on the stages of group development, distinguishes between the interpersonal stages of group development and the task behaviors exhibited in groups. During the initial stage, forming, groups members engage in testing behaviors as they attempt to identify boundaries in the newly-formed group. After a period of conflict (storming), groups engage in norming, where roles are adopted, standards evolve, and cohesiveness develops. Groups then enter the final phase, performing, where they settle into doing the work of the group. Tuckman and Jensen (1977) later added a fifth phase, adjourning, to accommodate those groups with a specific life-span. A different approach to group development is found in the punctuated equilibrium model put forth by Gersick (1988). Based on field studies of organizational groups, Gersick found that rather than moving through a linear series of stages, groups tended to establish working and communication patterns early on, usually in their first meetings, that remained stable until a change period at the midpoint of the group’s life. Although these two models are indicative of how differently group development can be modeled, the research overall shows the initial interactions to be critical for how groups will learn to work and collaborate (Chidambaram & Bostrom, 1996).

Although most research on group development has been based on face-to-face groups, the rise in prominence of CMC for group interaction has led to an attendant focus on the development of computer-mediated groups, and specifically the development and expression of normative