

FROM DEPENDENCY TOWARDS SELF DIRECTION VIA VIRTUAL CHAT: THE CASE OF ONE TAFE CLASS

Elizabeth Creese

School of Management
RMIT University, Australia
elizabeth.creese@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

The quality of online interaction via computer-mediated communication that might enable the collaborative construction of knowledge can be seen in terms of the ability of students to operate effectively in the medium. However, even when the communicative technical skills are sufficiently in place, there are the virtual dynamics to consider. Even the most technologically capable communicators may be students, accustomed to being teacher dependent, and possibly reluctant to take up the responsibility for the task of learning. The importance of the role of the E-moderator is often stressed, especially in synchronous chat, to enable constructive discussion to occur but in a manner that invites students to take self-responsibility. This study of TAFE students using virtual chat in an online campus-based course, traces their development, with the help of their online facilitator, from dependency towards self-direction.

Keywords

social interaction, virtual chat, group dynamics, online moderator

Introduction

With the convergence of communication and information technologies many “educators are wondering whether the online format will provide adequate support for genuine dialogue and social interaction, vital elements in the learning process” (Hobaugh, 1997, cited in Muirhead, 2000a, p. 1). Stacey (1998), Treleaven, Cecez-Kecmanovic & Wright (2000), Wegerif (1998) and Curtis (1999) are positive about the potential for collaborative construction of knowledge through social interaction via web technologies such as threaded discussion, virtual chat and email. Stacey (1998) outlines the importance of collaborative behaviour in computer-mediated communication (CMC) to support group learning or the need to have social presence if the cognitive is to be sustained (Garrison, 1996, cited in Stacey, 1999, p.28). This paper looks at the dynamics that affect the learning in an online non-distance course where students are required to communicate using the chat facility in the Classroom, within RMIT’s Distributed Learning System. It links social constructivist learning theory with the psycho-social theory or Tavistock School of group relations.

The ability to construct knowledge via social interaction over the web requires particular “kinds of communicative and technical capabilities” (Hara & Kling, 2000, p.1). These have been identified by Rowntree (cited in Muirhead, 2000b) as good computer skills, a level of online literacy and discussion, time management and interactive skills. From the initial survey the students in this study were found, although new to chat, to have sufficiently developed skills to be able to operate well enough in this medium: all students for example were excellent touch typists. Rather it was the dynamics around the teacher and online facilitator that was found to be of significance in terms of learning. Similarly the purpose of communicating in synchronous chat, while not the imperative of distance education students, was found to be sufficiently authentic (Stacey, 1998). Technical reliability, although a factor was also ‘good enough’ for the purposes of the study.

Collaborative Learning in Cyberspace

The behaviour or dynamics of a group (Bion, 1961) can exist virtually. Jacques, 1992, (cited in Stacey, 1998, p.13) suggests that “the sense of the group exists even when members are not collected in the same place.” The dynamics of virtual groups suggest the degree to which students are able to be mature psychologically (Klein, 1959) and therefore display behaviour that is capable of sustaining adult learning. Or to use Bion’s (1961) thesis; whether the group can operate as a work group and focus on the task or whether it functions defensively from one of three basic assumptions, fight/flight, dependency or pairing. It is suggested that cyberspace can be thought of as Winnicott’s (1971) potential place, where the creative play of a child occurs in the presence of m/other. Suggested also is the possibility that deep learning may occur in this virtual space, where the m/other might be the E-moderator.

The Importance of the E-moderator in Cyberspace

Muirhead (2000b) suggests that educators play a vital role in promoting consistent and relevant interaction between students and tutors. Salmon (2000, p.46) asserts the importance of the E-moderator in synchronous learning networks “to avert chaos.” This role is summarised as the ability to give good clear structure to the session, to clarify objectives, roles of participation as well as ensuring participation by all parts.

Similarly a Tavistock facilitator manages the time, task and territory, thus encouraging participants to take-up their full authority. Rather than to operate defensively from basic assumptions and in particular Basic Assumption Dependency, where the group is dependent upon the teacher and unable to take full responsibility for its learning (Bion, 1961).

The Study and its Design

This ethnographic study is of a TAFE class of twenty students who participated in virtual chats in Semester 2, 2000, as part of one of three online subjects studied mainly on-campus, namely DM425 Project Management.

The study was designed to carry out a “social anthropological evaluation” (Parlett & Hamilton, 1972) taking in a student perspective to illuminate and explore problems, features and issues. The focus was on the psycho-dynamic or underlying issues behind students’ online textual interaction. Discussion logs and interview transcripts were analysed using Schein’s (1990) three tiered model of culture comprising artefacts, norms, values and assumptions.

A case study methodology was used to develop a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of student chats comprising as follows: firstly in the computer labs, three whole class chats and those between each of four syndicate groups. Secondly, there were two whole class chats from remote locations. While the E-moderator chose the discussion questions for the whole class chats, the syndicates chose their discussion questions. Chats were observed wherever possible by the researcher who also followed-up with an interview. Data also included the initial survey mentioned above concerning online experience, an interview with the E-moderator, and a whole class focus group.

DM425 and Research Setting

The TAFE students knew the E-moderator well from previous face-to-face classes and continued to enjoy such contact in DM425: they praised her for returning their emails “like a Mum.” The E-moderator says that she had actively been working against this Basic Assumption Dependency (Bion, 1961), seeing her role very much as “supporting students in (their own) learning.” Student centred online learning materials direct students through various stages of managing a project.

Analysis and Discussion of Online Dynamics

For the purposes of the analysis, students are nominated by their initial and time, in terms of hours, minutes and seconds in which they posted.

On face value, it might seem that some of the key requirements identified above by Salmon (2000) for the E-moderator were not adequately met. The first three whole class sessions are virtually 'chaos' with no apparent logical discussion or learning about content. However, for the E-moderator these sessions met her objectives of student familiarisation with the chat facility.

Several of the key issues raised by students in the final focus group, important questions not being answered and lack of clarification (also raised by E 01:11:35 on Oct 9) however are related to deliberate ploys by the E-moderator to assist the students in taking responsibility for their own learning. Some examples are given to demonstrate.

In the Aug 28 syndicate *Chuppa Chops* session, the E-moderator deliberately does not participate, although logged on, until half way through the session. Here the group appear to collaborate quite effectively on the component parts of the final project management report. The E-moderator, however, had "gone through this with them in class over and over" for the previous three semesters and thought it was now "up to them." Therefore she 'ignores'

B: Are you sure, they don't go in the appendices?

F: Dp(o) you put that in the ana(l)yl(i)sis? adding instead

You must also review your project costs.

In the *Virgomania* syndicate session on the same day L is apparently left asking whether her project can be hypothetical. M continues to complain about not having time to contact key people. As the E-moderator explains, L and she had discussed endlessly the possibilities to do with her (Ls) project face-to-face: M can be seen to be projecting (Klein, 1959) her inability to make adequate time for her project. The group continues to "fool around." They evade the real issues and continue to question whether costings, their choice of discussion question, is what they were supposed to be talking about. The E-moderator's response is to subtly admonish the group:

01.15.52 These chats are aimed at helping students clarify any points eg costings. If we were at remote locations, you would not be able to speak to one another.

This however seems to have little effect on the group who continue to evade discussing project costings. N logs off because the chat is "crap" and she has had "only one question answered." It seems that the group, including L and M, are not able to help N with her costings because their energy is taken up in Basic Assumption Dependency functioning (Bion, 1961).

The first whole class remote chat on Sep 4 is spent defending against the anxiety of completing their projects (Menzies, 1970). The whole time is spent talking about what needs to be done and why they are unable to do it. Here it is clearly a case of the collective group fear about the assessment preventing any collaboration online that could lead to learning. The dependent group appear to be working from the assumption, that if only 'Mum' could look after them properly, they would not have to face up to what in fact they need to do.

Interestingly, it is only when the group has taken responsibility for completing their project reports that they can make use of the October 9's remote and final chat whole class session. Here there is a valuable and mature discussion on the group's experience of online chat. This is the only session where the quality of interaction enables the task or discussion question to be consistently carried, as if with a natural ability at all the factors outlined above by Rowntree (1995 cited in Muirhead, 2000b). The discussion is literate, with students reading and responding critically to one another's messages. Time is managed well with most participating effectively under the E-moderator's facilitation. Finally the students also demonstrate the 'net etiquette' or quality of interacting that shows respect for others.

Conclusion

Concerns with the quality of online interaction suggest that the virtual environment may be an inhibitor to learning. However the online dynamics in this study suggest rather, that DM425 students were only able to socially construct knowledge, demonstrating their pre-existing “communicative and technical capabilities (Hara & Kling, 2000, p.1) when, as with face-to-face teaching, they had finally taken responsibility for the task of completing their individual projects. The role of any facilitator, virtual or online, is crucial to such development. Even if the students have the requisite skills to operate effectively in the virtual environment, they still need to move from dependency on the E-moderator so they can become genuinely self-directed in their learning.

References

- Bion, W. R. (1961). *Experiences in groups*. London: Tavistock Publications.
- Curtis, D. (1999). *Collaborative online learning: An exploratory case study*. In HERDSA Annual International Conference, Melbourne, 12-15 July.
- Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. London: Basic Books.
- Klein, M. (1959). Our adult world and its roots in infancy. *Human Relations*, 12, 291-301.
- Hara, N. & Kling, R. (2000). *Students' distress with a web-based distance education course*. [Online]. Available: <http://www.slis.indiana.edu/CSI/wp00-01.html> [29 September 2001].
- Menzies, I. (1970). *The functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety*. Tavistock Pamphlet No.3, London: The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations.
- Muirhead, B. (2000a). *Enhancing social interaction in computer-mediated distance education*. Paper published for the International Forum of Educational Technology & Society. [Online]. Available: http://ifets.ieee.org/discussion/dicsuss_sept2000.html [24th August 2000].
- Muirhead, B. (2000b). Interactivity in a Graduate Distance Education School. *Educational Technology & Society*, 3 (1). [Online]. Available: http://ifets.ieee.org/periodical/vol_1_2000/muirhead.html [28 September 2001].
- Parlett, M. & Hamilton, D. (1987). Evaluation as illumination: A new approach to the study of innovatory programmes. In R. Murphy, & H. Torrance, (Eds.), *Evaluating education: Issues and methods*. London: Harper & Row Ltd.
- Salmon, G. (2000). *E-moderation, the key to teaching and learning online*. London: Kogan Page.
- Schein, E. (1990). Organisational Culture. *American Psychologist*, 45 (2), 109-119.
- Stacey, E. (1998). *Study of the enhancement of learning through group interaction by computer mediated communication*. Unpublished manuscript.
- Treleaven, L., Cecez-Kecmanovic, D. & Wright, S. (2000). (submitted). *Communicative practices in web-enhanced collaborative learning: A view from within*. Studies in Continuing Education.
- Wegerif, R. (1998). The Social Dimension of Asynchronous Learning Networks. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 2 (1), 1-15.
- Winnicott, D. (1971). *Playing and reality*. London: Penguin.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledged is the participation of the E-moderator of DM425 Jan Kelly and her students.

Copyright © 2001 Elizabeth Creese.

The author assigns to ASCILITE and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author also grants a non-exclusive licence to ASCILITE to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) and in printed form within the ASCILITE 2001 conference proceedings. Any after usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author.