Chapter 18
Gender and Diversity in Collaborative Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

Computer supported collaborative learning environments (CSCLEs) is one of the innovative technologies that support online education. Successful design and implementation of such environments demand thorough analysis of many parameters. This chapter studies the impact of diversity in learner-learner interactions in collaborative virtual teams through a social and cultural perspective. Social differences include gender, race, class, or age. Cultural differences refer to matters like how an individual's cognition, values, beliefs, and study behaviors are influenced by culture. Instructors must take into consideration the factors that influence individuals' diversity, and invent new ways to implement successful collaboration. This is crucial, especially regarding teams scattered on different countries or even continents. Social and cultural differences influence an individual's performance in a learning environment. Such differences must be adequately studied by both the educational organization and the instructors in such a way that the learning procedure will become a positive experience for all the members involved.

INTRODUCTION

It is beyond any doubt that adequate education is one of the key factors for successful embedment of the synchronous man to a world that becomes increasingly digitalized. The increased use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) generated a major modification in both the pedagogical and educational methodologies (Andrews & Schwarz, 2002). This refers to the teacher-learner relationship and embraces matters

like personalized learning, collaboration, interaction, and evaluation.

The approach of participative learning offers the possibility of developing novel learning environments that support collaboration, rapid interaction and feedback, real time communication, information seeking, and problem solving. The learner has the opportunity to construct knowledge through a process of discussion and interaction with both other learners and teachers (Michailidou & Economides, 2003).

Diversity in computer supported collaborative learning environments (CSCLEs) is a complex concept. It is one thing to create diversity by recruiting learners—of different nationality, cultural background, race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, discipline, and another thing to develop a supportive educational environment in which individuals of diverse backgrounds can perform at their highest levels and contribute fully to the learning procedure (Chen, Czerwinski, & Macredie, 2000). Even more challenging is the task of fully integrating the varied knowledge experiences, perspectives, and values that learners of diverse backgrounds bring into the educational environment.

This chapter begins with a discussion concerning the issue of collaboration in virtual teams. Afterwards, diversity in collaborative virtual teams is being studied, along with its impact in learner-learner interactions. Some suggestions to the instructors for facilitating effective learning in a collaborative computer-supported environment are also included. Finally, the conclusions are presented along with future trends.

COLLABORATION IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

A virtual team is a group of people who work interdependently across space, time, cultures, and organizational boundaries on temporary, nonoccurring projects with a shared purpose, while using technology (Lipnack & Stamps, 2000). Virtual teams are utilized in multiple settings, including education (teams formed among students of distance learning classes), professional development, as well as corporate and community organizations.

The use of virtual teams is growing in popularity, especially in work-related and educational organizations. There are many advantages for using virtual teams in an educational setting. These include the creation of learning communities and the opportunity to work collaboratively to generate new knowledge. Working in virtual teams presents unexplored opportunities for peer interaction as teams create new knowledge to resolve the problem assigned. Additionally, it asserts that the best conditions for intellectual accomplishment are environments that are motivated by discovery, the reciprocal feedback between mutually-respected individuals, and the free exchange of ideas. Conclusively, virtual teams have become a vehicle for distance education, through which group work is accomplished in demanding learning environments (Anderson & Garrison, 1998).

The current chapter analyzes the gender and diversity impact in collaborative computer-mediated environments formed basically for educational purposes. Therefore, if the instructors study the diversity issue in a potential learning virtual team, then some solutions might occur, concerning the embodiment of diversity parameters and their impact in the success factors of a collaborative task.

Diversity intensively influences the performance of a virtual team in an educational setting. Many significant factors constitute diversity like those related to differences in social and cultural characteristics, gender, ethics, knowledge, educational experiences, and future expectations. For most virtual teams to be effective, some degree of diversity is both desirable and necessary. If all the team members have the same perspectives, histories, work experience, and academic

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