

Chapter X

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.

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