

Chapter 5.3

The Social Psychology of Online Collaborative Learning: The Good, the Bad, and the Awkward

Donna Ashcraft

Clarion University of Pennsylvania, USA

Thomas Treadwell

West Chester University, USA

ABSTRACT

Many social psychological phenomena that are found in face-to-face group work are also found in online group work (i.e., collaborative learning). In this chapter, we describe some of these more common phenomena, including social loafing, social categorization, and a variety of cognitive distortions. We also describe the stages that groups go through in order to become fully functioning teams. Because some of these experiences are unpleasant for both the instructor and the student, both faculty and students sometimes resist the use of collaborative learning. Furthermore, because of the anonymous nature of online group work, these negative experiences can be magnified. We therefore make recommendations on how best to respond to and resolve them. We specifically draw on our experiences with Collaborative Online Research and Learning (CORAL) in order to demonstrate these phenomena and recommendations. CORAL is a teaching/learning method that integrates two course topics through assignments. Teams of students at

two universities must complete together by utilizing video conferencing and other online tools.

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we examine problems instructors and students experience in collaborative learning by drawing on social psychological literature and our own experiences in implementing online collaborative learning. In particular, we draw on our experiences of teaching Collaborative Online Research and Learning (CORAL) (Treadwell & Ashcraft, 2005; Chamberlin, 2000) classes for more than seven years. CORAL is a constructivist pedagogy that allows students to form learning communities across sites. In CORAL, students at distant sites utilize a variety of electronic technology in order to jointly complete assignments of mutual interest. More specifically, students from two different universities, enrolled in two different courses, collaborate on semester-long projects designed to integrate course topics (e.g., developing research proposals related to both course topics). Students utilize video conferencing, discussion boards, file

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managers, online calendars, and chat rooms to communicate across, and within, sites to complete assignments. While completing their semester-long projects, students observe their own group's behaviors through a number of collaborative analyses, and are encouraged to modify any behaviors that are not collaborative. The collaborative analyses consist of a series of readings and exercises students complete and use to understand course material related to their own group's processes (for a more detailed description of the CORAL model, see Treadwell & Ashcraft, 2005).

We also make recommendations on how to minimize problems encountered during the life of collaborative teams. The majority of these recommendations are based on research findings in the social psychological literature demonstrating their success in other settings. Others are based on their anecdotal success in our CORAL course. Throughout the chapter, we use examples from CORAL to demonstrate how we apply these recommendations. In essence, we focus on the process that instructors need to utilize to ensure successful online collaboration among students. As Lee (2004) notes, there is little information that provides these types of practical guidelines for less-experienced, Web-based, instructional designers, although there is quite a bit of literature on assessing whether Web-based courses have been successful. We therefore take a process view of online collaboration, rather than a product view (Lee, 2004).

COLLABORATIVE AND COOPERATIVE LEARNING

In collaborative learning, students work together to achieve a shared learning goal (i.e., they form learning communities, reassuring the formation of collaborative ideas within a mutually-supportive environment encouraging scholarship). Although the terms collaborative and cooperative are used interchangeably within the literature, they should

not be confused. In cooperative learning, students also work together to complete projects, but do so by dividing up the work among team members. In collaborative learning, students work on each aspect of a project by contributing and building on each other's ideas, along with sharing the workload. Thus, although cooperative learning (i.e., distributing work among team members) is part of collaborative learning, it is not the essential characteristic. Instead, the key characteristic of collaborative learning is the development of ideas through interactions with others. A benefit of collaborative learning over cooperative learning, among others, is students learning all the subject matter assimilated into a large project, rather than just the portion required by cooperative education. Beyond this, however, collaborative learning is more flexible and student-oriented. Cooperative learning is more directive, task-oriented, and teacher-oriented (Panitz, 1996).

While both types of learning are typically designed for—and usually take place in—the classroom, collaborative learning is especially conducive for online learning communities. Indeed, Furr, McFerrin, and Fuller (2004) state that “Distance education is collaborative education” (p. 211). By this, the authors imply that a clear advantage distributed collaborative learning has over face-to-face collaboration is the electronic technology. The technology creates a *disorienting dilemma*, allowing for an examination of—and subsequent change in—student work habits and attitudes, and thinking clarification (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). A disorienting dilemma is something that catches students' attention, a surprise that they further examine and reflect upon, thereby creating cognitive changes. In other words, students in collaborative online learning communities realize that the old work habits they are accustomed to in traditional face-to-face classes do not work well in a mutual learning environment. Students learn to modify their behaviors to be successful in their new learning environment, and these modifications create increases and improvements in learning.

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