The role of context as an antecedent of divisiveness in online MBA groups

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Abstract

While the call for research on how groups learn in networked settings has increased in the past few years (Hodgson and Watland, 2004; McConnell, 2006; Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich, 2005) further research is needed to examine the relational dynamics found between the structural features of a learning context and how these features influence group dynamics and group work (Carabajal, LaPointe and Gunawardena, 2003). Taking into account broader understandings of the learning context are needed as context plays an important but under scrutinized role in group work and group dynamics. Initial results from a Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) study examining retrospective accounts of problems undertaking group work in an online MBA suggest that problematic behaviours experienced by group members groups may be sourced within the well spring of operational policies and practices. Tentative findings from the current study suggest that both learners and course tutors behave in ways that privilege competition and competitiveness rather than collectivity.

Keywords

Networked management learning; learning context, grounded theory, group work.

Introduction

This paper argues that online group dynamics and collaborative group work cannot be understood without taking into account the broader learning context within which collaborative work is embedded (Hodgson and Watland, 2004; Boot and Reynolds, 2002; Goodyear, 2002; Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich,2005). According to Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2005) contextual factors play a pivotal but under scrutinized role in our understanding of networked settings. To date organizational contexts have focused on the provisioning of instructional services and support, technological platform, instructor training (Salmon, 2000). Researchers are However broader notions of learning context have been proffered that take into account divisiveness, unpredictability and power relations (Jones, 2005).

The relational dynamics between group work and organizational practices is one focus of the current study. The paper draws from preliminary findings from an exploratory study on challenges faced by management learners undertaking group work in an online MBA program. The method used to explore group dynamics is grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), drawing in particular from the analytical strategies of Glaser (1978; 1992) and Charmaz (2006). Grounded theory is concerned with identifying the main concerns of participants in the social setting (Glaser, 1978) and with identifying processes that shape actions in a social context (Crooks, 2001).

Origin of study and research rationale

The idea for this study originated from a serendipitous encounter with an individual who was pursuing an online Masters in Management degree at a Canadian post secondary institution. Louise (a pseudonym) and I met while attending a face to face conflict management training offered by the Alberta Arbitration and Mediation Society. During the initial introductions Louise informed the class that she needed help in dealing with interpersonal and motivational challenges undertaking group work assignments in her online degree. Louise was finding the disagreements and disputes, including a short bout of cyber harassment, frustrating and problematic. Concerns had been shared with course tutors and program managers; however their lack of action suggested the problem to be of her own making. At the time, I had been associated with a university based technology and learning division whose primary mandate was to

introduce web based teaching and learning practices into conventional and off-campus courses. Impediments surrounding group work were relatively minor in nature with problems typically situated around access to computer labs.

Educators are not unaware of the difficulties and hurtles associated with disparate time zones, work routines and cultural differences. For example, logistical challenges associated with peer collaboration on joint research projects have been documented (cf. Engvig, 2006; Hurst and Thomas, 2003). Team work and group problems are to some extent a rite of passage in face to face settings. Complaints over difficulties working with group members along with social loafing issues are a familiar lament to many educators (Bowen, 1998; Tata, 2002; O'Donnell and O'Kelly, 1994). Yet for the most part drawbacks are seen as outweighing more positive gains, and a way to experientially develop group skills (Lewins, 2006). Case studies have documented unexpected contingencies (Jones, 2005) associated with task and implementation (McConnell, 2006). In addition, anecdotal flaming incidents have been reported in several online collaborative group projects (c.f. Robertshaw, 2000; McLoughlin & Luca, 2001).

In addition, when group members are not co-located empirical evidence seems to suggest greater challenges undertaking group work (Landry, 2000; Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Cramton, 2001). For example, Cramton (2002) reports higher levels of misperceptions and misunderstandings occurring amongst off - campus versus co-located learners (Cramton, 2001). Moreover online courses containing group assignments make it more likely for disagreements to lead to interpersonal conflicts (Zafeiriou, 2003). It is clear that geographically dispersed groups may face unique challenges undertaking collaborative group work (McConnell, 2006; Berry, 2002; Crampton, 2001; Sahay, Sarker and Lau, 2000).

Research approach

Studying complex and dynamic social settings requires an interpretive, qualitative approach to the study of social phenomena which takes into account overt and covert social behaviour. The current study draws from two qualitative research methods, retrospective narratives –to provide written accounts of experiences working with groups and grounded theory, an inductive, qualitative method for analysing the data. I begin with a short rationale for the methods.

Narratives

Problematic situations have narrative qualities (Maines & Ulmer, 1993). Narratives are defined as, 'talk organized around consequential events' in a person's life' (Riessman, 1993: 3). According to Maines & Ulmer (1993), 'narratives or 'stories' capture interpretive reality of the social actor and link private and public versions of social reality' (113). The notion of social reality having public and private properties aligns with the theoretical framework of the current study, symbolic internationism. According to Blumer (1969) social behaviour cannot be sufficiently understood without taking into account overt and covert actions (Athens, 1993). Covert processes may be accessible through negotiation between the social actor and the researcher through story-telling or narratives and the sharing of retrospective experience told in symbolic (told or written) forms (Milliken & Schreiber, 2001; Garrick, 1999). Since narratives emphasize the unfolding of events and process, it is a preferred strategy for early stages of a grounded theory study (Morse, 2001).

Grounded Theory

Grounded theory concerns itself with new or little understood social phenomena embedded in people's actions, interpretations and meanings (Schreiber, 2001; Milliken & Schreiber, 2002; Morse, 2001: 5). It is useful when 'there are major gaps in our understanding [of social phenomena or processes], and where a new perspective might be beneficial' (Schreiber, 2001: 57) and for providing analytic explanations for 'real world' problems, as defined by those experiencing the problems (Charmaz, 2000). Grounded theory has been successfully used to examine situations or problems faced by social groups. It provides analytic explanations for 'real world' problems, as defined by those experiencing the problems (Charmaz, 2000). As a research strategy, it offers empirical tools to study complex social phenomena (Stern & Covan, 2001) and a way of revealing the 'hidden meanings embedded in people's actions as they deal with the basic social problem that they share (Milliken and Schreiber, 2001: 179).

Research context

The context for this study is a networked learning program offering part time studies for an EMBA or MBA degree. The location of the program is in North America. Martins, Gilson and Maynard (2004) would characterize the nature of the program and the characteristics of the learning groups as highly virtual, meaning learners depend exclusively on technology to support their communication and information needs. The program draws middle-career professionals in senior level management from private industry, government, healthcare and the military.

Individual courses run for eight weeks with group membership being randomly assigned by the program. Learning activities consist of assigned weekly discussion questions and two and occasionally three case studies. In addition to group work, learners also submit an assigned essay. There are a total of 13 courses in the program, two annual exams and a final thesis. Roughly 1/3 of assigned marks are individually allocated to learner participation in the weekly discussions, contribution to the case based work and individual essays. The program does not provide a an initial face to face orientation although there is a one week online orientation, nor are learners eligible to attend face to face residency courses, of which there are two, until year two of their studies. Program completion averages 2.5 to 3 years, making it one of the lengthier MBA programs in North America. Tuition fees for the EMBA program are approximately £22,000.00.

Sample

In addition to two pilot participants, twenty learners responded to a call for research participants in the winter of 2006 (13 females and 7 males). Interviews were also conducted with five stakeholders who have had a prior connection with the program. Interview length ranged from one hour to three hours and the number of interviews ranged from one to three.

Other data

In addition to written narratives and interviews, additional data was gathered. These include learning and resource materials for learners and instructional staff (tutors) and various institutionally publications. Limited quantitative data tracking learner and course tutors engagements over a two year and a half year time frame was also provided by participants. Finally, the study draws from a recent PhD study undertaken by Watland (2007) which was situated within the same learning context.

Research goals

The initial goal of the study was to identify structures and patterns (behaviors) associated with group work, and to explore relations between structural and group collaborative processes, in particular those which social actors identify as being problematic.

Definition of terms: Group work

Whether the act is called teamwork (Luca and Tarricone, 2002; Gunawardena, Nolla, Wilson, Lopez-Islas, Ramirez-Angel and Megchun-Alpizar, 2001) or learning groups (Johnson and Johnson, 2004), having individuals learn together rather than alone is a well established principle in education (Dewey, 1922/1972). According to Johnson and Johnson (2004) early educational applications of group work may be traced to England during the 1700s and North America a century later.

Group based instruction is an important practice associated with the instruction of learners in MBA programs (Elliott and Reynolds, 2005; Urch Druskat & Kayes, 2000; Sondak, 2002; Chen, Donahue, & Klimoski, 2004). Group projects or group work are seen as an increasingly important practice in online, networked settings in general (McConnell, 2005) and online management programs in particular (Arbaugh and Duray 2002). Group engagements help to overcome the potentially isolating effects of individualized learning prevalent in distance learning (Crook, 1994) and it provides a useful means for eliciting and building interaction among disparate learners (Gabriel, 2004). Moreover groups are

empirically acknowledged to enrich the learning experience by providing learners to greater and divergent perspectives (Johnson and Johnson, 2004), and for developing problem solving skills (Bruffee, 1999).

Group work is defined as 'three or more persons who interact regularly to perform a joint task, who share a common frame of reference, who have affective ties with one another, and whose behaviors and outcomes are interdependent' (Levine and Moreland, 1987:257). A similar definition provided by Harris and Harris (1996) is 'a group or unit with a common purpose through which members develop mutual relationships for the achievement of goals/tasks' (23). Rather than group work, Boettcher and Conrad (1999) use the term collaborative groups which they define as groups consisting of learners working 'throughout a course to complete a series of problem-solving or peer-learning activities that culminate in a product, such as a project report, or an action, such as leading an online conference' (Boettcher and Conrad, 1999: 88). These definitions thus far have little to say regarding the context within which groups operate. According to Elliott and Reynolds (2005) groups and their work have traditionally been viewed as neutral and unproblematic constructs (Boot and Reynolds, 2002:98; Barron, 2006; cf. Bernard, de Rubalcava and St. Pierre, 2000). In other words, group work is contextually stripped of the conditions within which groups operate (McGrath, 1991; Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson and McConnell, 2004). Naturalistic group research paradigms, which draw from qualitative methods, are increasingly emphasizing the relational role of social context in group work (McGrath, 1991). The next section explores how notions of context have been traditionally treated in online and technology based learning.

Forms of context

Defining context is not a simple undertaking as meanings alter depending on the theoretical perspective, academic discipline and world view one is most comfortable with (Figueiredo & Afonso, 2006). Like most complex social constructs the term lacks a singular and consensual definition (cited by Roque and Figueiredo, 2006). Context is a Latin term *cum* (with) and *texere* (to weave) and refers to the process of weaving or joining together (Brown and Duguid, 2002: 202). One hindrance in seeking to understand how context is treated in the education and networked learning literature is the tendency for published studies to overlook or ignored the construct, thereby treating context implicitly rather than explicitly (Figueiredo and Afonso, 2006). Context is often linked with other constructs, one such linkage being 'social context' (cf. Martins, Gilson and Maynard, 2004). However social context has been adopted by researchers to encompass instructional mechanisms or strategies for effective design, online learner characteristics (Tu and Corry, 2002); or simply an umbrella term for task, privacy, social process and relationships (Tu and McIsaac, 2002). This inconsistency in usage suggests 'conceptual blurring' (Stern, 1995) thereby adding little to the clarity of the term.

Functionalist learning contexts

Social context may also refer to a disciplinary bounded setting, for example, a distance learning context (cf.Teuber, 2006; Bernard, Rojo de Rubalcava, and St. Pierre, 2000) or a physical or social space such as 'learning context' (cf. Wihelm, 1997; Duchastel and Molz, 2006; Spector, 2002). Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich (2005) for example, refer to learning context in their discussion of factors which help or hinder the effectiveness of asynchronous learning networks. These include technology, pedagogy, course characteristics, models of delivery and other institutionally related implementation factors. However their emphasis on efficiency suggest a deterministic and functionalist oriented learning context more closely associated with the positivist views of social reality (Hughes and Sharrock, 1990). In this reading, it is not learning which is primary but technology. In essence, technology creates the context and consequently, it is the properties of technology which shape social behaviour and outcomes (Sismondo, 2004).

Learning community contexts

An alternative perspective of context situates learning as physically and socially embedded within a learning community (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 2000) or networked learning context (McConnell, 2006). Rather than efficiency being of primary concern, attention is paid to the 'formation and well-being of convivial learning relationships' (Goodyear, 2002: 66). Therefore creating a community is of primary concern (McConnell, 2006). Learning communities operate on the belief that collectivism is a superior way of advancing knowledge. Growth and skills are privileged over individualistic methods, in other

words, when the collective benefits, its members benefit. Inherent in this approach are prescribed values and beliefs which include respect for a collectivist ideology and for its members (Bielaczyc and Collins, 1999). From this perspective, a learning context isn't as much created as constructed; the notion of community emerges from the interactions between learners and the learning context (Goodyear, 2002). There is wide agreement that the ideological glue anchoring this learning context is constructivist, social constructionist and socio-cultural in nature.

Alternative notions of context

> If the espoused values are not the same as the underlying beliefs, then mistrust, deception, and disillusionment can result for organizational members. (Hare and O'Neill, 2000: 32).

This study draws on debates in networked management learning and takes as its analytical focus a more critical understanding of the ways in which collaborative group practices are shaped by underlying ideologies, norms and practices (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005; Ferreday, 2005; Boot and Reynolds, 2002). A theme of these debates is that community and collaboration may obscure ideologies and practices which privilege power, difference and conflict (Boot and Reynolds, 2002:90; Jones, 2005).

According to Boot and Reynolds (2002), 'group activities, however focused or prescribed, can reflect contextual processes of organizations, communities and society as a whole' (97). The outcomes from the current study question whether learning community values and beliefs are sustainable in a traditional MBA curriculum, which despite recent curriculum innovations, nevertheless retain much of the ideological thinking and traditions of the 1960s (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). Curriculum values and beliefs are shaped by underlying philosophies which may run counter to notions of collectivity and community within which networked learning groups operate. For example, design policies may unintentionally serve to create difference amongst social groups. Group work may be viewed in instrumental ways by learners and collaborative work may be undermined by indirectly approving and rewarding competitive and individualized behaviour. Learning may be viewed as task completion with performativity supplanting collectivity (Pedler, 2002).

Tentative findings

Groups face greater challenges undertaking collaborative work because of the nature of the delivery mechanism and distance (Davis & Holt, 1998). While the call for research on how groups learn in networked settings has increased in the past few years (Hodgson and Watland, 2004; McConnell, 2006; Arbaugh and Benbunan-Fich, 2005) further research is needed to examine the relational dynamics found between the structural features of a learning context and how these features influence group dynamics and group work (Carabajal, LaPointe and Gunawardena, 2003). Taking into account broader understandings of the learning context are needed as context plays an important but under scrutinized role in group work and group dynamics.

This presentation will focus on the ways in which espoused policies and the unfolding practices create barriers to collaboration and learning. Tentative findings suggest that both learners and course tutors behave in ways that privilege competition and competitiveness rather than collectivity. For example, collaborative group work entails a sophisticated level of task coordination with synchronized gateways that group members must progress through in order to successfully achieve group goals (Johnson and Johnson, 2004). Groups struggle to synchronize behaviour in a setting where operational norms and ideological beliefs overtly and covertly negate and devalue synchronized group engagements. Needing to synchronize individuals' work runs counter to the notions of flexibility attributed to online learning practices (Mason, 2005). This 'myth of flexibility' indirectly impacts on a group's ability to coordinates group efforts and becomes one factor, among several, which may contribute to 'no-shows', 'non completed work', 'a-walling' (disappearing) of group members and 'eleventh hour' or 'derailing' behaviours. Findings suggest that groups encounter substantial difficulty when competitiveness and self interested behaviours are subtly condoned and rewarded by instructional staff. In these cases, performativity becomes a dominant practice which undermines ideologies of collectivity and collaboration (Pedler, 2002). The current study questions whether learning community and collaborative

values and beliefs are sustainable in a traditional MBA curriculum, which despite recent curriculum innovations, nevertheless retain much of the ideological thinking and traditions of the 1960s (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002).

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