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Using Computer-Mediated-Communication to Explore Group Dynamics Online

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SUMMARY

This article will examine the experiences of a group of students who used C&IT to explore issues of group dynamics. Some of the challenges connected with running an online class as part of a face-to-face environment are discussed. The course unit 'Interpersonal Communication in Education' has been a core course unit for the M.Ed program 'Communication, Education and Technology'. The course is experiential and reflective, and aims to develop high levels of interdependence. Aspects of the course were negotiated and students wished to include C&IT as part of the program. This session became part of those devoted to group dynamics. The students were enthusiastic and their responses were analyzed into 5 themes. The feedback from the questionnaires, reflective meetings and plenary suggested that there was enthusiasm to explore an online learning environment more fully and the Program Director is considering including more electronic communication activities into this particular M.Ed program.

KEYWORDS: *Postgraduate, experiential learning, online learning*

BACKGROUND

Interpersonal Communication in Education has been a core course unit for an M.Ed program in 'Communications, Education and Technology', at the School Of Education of University of Manchester, UK. More details of the course can be found at Davis & Ralph, (2001). This paper examines the experiences of a group of M.Ed students who explored group dynamics online when using a specific platform as part of their main M.Ed studies in the University. Data were drawn from the following main sources: the conference itself; the reflective group meetings and plenary; two questionnaires completed by the students, one during the first week of the course, the other immediately after completing the C&IT experience. This is supplemented by comments from an end of course assignment completed by one of the authors. We analyzed the transcript of the online discussion by using qualitative methods (discourse analysis, content analysis).

FINDINGS

It is interesting that all participants with only one exception (a female from overseas) joined the online discussion. Despite our expectations, participants were active while communicating and they took advantage of reflections on the new experience. Some of them decided to wait and use their personal learning journals in order to speak. There are 5 themes that we would like to draw from our analysis:

TECHNOLOGY

The level of IT experience of the student group varied greatly, although the general level of experience (and access) was noted to have risen steadily during the course (questionnaires, reflective meetings). Most of the online work appeared to be done from home. Students were

introduced to the software in a morning session and they had the opportunity to test it and get familiar with it. Although they found it quite easy and interesting, some of them still were not confident about how to gain access to the conference and the article they had to read for the online discussion. However, the least experienced students felt able to ask other members of the group for help and advice. For example, Baluck, a student with no computing experience prior to the start of his program, asked through his e-mail for help because he couldn't enter the login page. He writes in his online experience questionnaire that: *…It is a good experience! Although I don't know to use computers well I found quite easy this way of communication. (Baluck, student CET, 2001)* One student was unable to access the conference because she didn't have computer at home and could not find the time to use the university computer facilities. Despite this, she said that she found the idea very challenging and stimulating. She said: *… I couldn't join the conversation but I believe that should be really exciting! We are in 21st century; we have to get use of this kind of communication (CET student, 2001).* A part time student, Jill, felt real proud of herself by doing this online activity. She said: *…I learned how to use e-conferencing (C&IT): this is a BIG step for me!. (Jill. Student CET, 2001)* Moreover, some students stress the 'shock' they faced in this new electronic medium: *..I felt really frustrated because I don't feel real comfortable when I use technology! I had problems to enter the page and when I did it nobody was in! (Lilan. 2001).* Alvin added: *Oh my God, how am I suppose to reflect my ideas in a computer screen?...is anyone here?* On the other hand, for Panos, who had some little experience of C&IT, this activity was a real challenge to explore in depth his "relationship" with technology and the way he likes to communicate. He said: *Being well computer literate and having participated several times in computer-mediated discussions I had not initial concerns regarding my ability to be effective in a C&IT medium.*

To sum up, it could be said that the nature of the course unit and the learning that arises from it develops insight and autonomy and moves students towards higher levels of interdependence (Denning & Davis, 2000). In the post-course evaluation session, all participants admitted that the use of online conferencing should be included not only as an one day session of a course unit but as a tool for group communication during the academic year in all course units and afterwards.

GENDER

The main argument here was that males feel more comfortable when using technology and they might be more computer literate than females. Jing, wrote with evident frustration: *I don't like computers and I use them only when I need so…I don't feel comfortable communicating with this, like probably most of the males do!! I like expressing my feelings face to face!* A counter argument was formulated by Alvin, who said: *.. For me technology is a 'monster' that I have to bit if I want to survive (laughed)!!* There was no evidence suggested that there were significant differences in the opinions of males and females in this group. It was noticed that males were giving absolute assertions and limiting responses. For example, Baluck answered in Lilan's question about the story of the Siamese Twins: *'I don't remember what to do!'* However, the females made much more effort to explain their positions. Jill wrote about the story: *… Makes me wonder what on earth it must have been like for the twins parents, being forces to make a decision they never, in their wildest nightmares, would have imagined having to make. No time to prepare themselves, just powerful people pressing them for an answer whilst their emotions must have been all over the place (especially the mother with her post-pregnancy hormones raging).*

CULTURE AND MOTIVATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Users made many comments about their countries, their cultures and their value system. For example, Panos wrote: *'..in Greece there are many regulations regarding to abortions but few people know them.'* They found C&IT a good opportunity to share ideas about their backgrounds in more detail. On some occasions they appealed to their culture/background to support opinions or even would avoid answering specific. Jing wrote that: *…I prefer not to answer in this*

question..it is a very sensitive issue in my country!'. Most of the answers that were given about social issues were 'biased' and identified by the participant's culture. As regards motivation, at the very beginning participants were communicating by using e-mail. This was for two reasons: They were trying to access the forum but also trying to motivate each other as nobody wanted to be the first to start the C&IT discussion. Lilan said in the plenary session: ' *I sent e-mail to my classmates to ask them if they entered the discussion...I didn't want to be the first..i thought that it could be a bit frustrated for me*. Additionally, some of the students claimed that they didn't find the topic stimulating enough so as to start a discussion. Alvin wrote: *I don't have anything to discuss about...why we selected this topic?*

ISSUES OF PARTICIPATION

In the online environment participants can reflect about what they want to say before replying. This benefits shy people or those who like thinking before speaking. People who would ordinarily dominate classroom discussions can't readily do so when discussing topics online (Davis and Ralph, 2001). Students online benefit from being able to go back through a threaded discussion to digest what was said. All students mentioned many advantages and disadvantages of C&IT. Most advantages have to do with the idea that C&IT is a new way of communication, which allows people communicating at a distance, for example, from schools, universities or other "places" without the necessity of real presence. In addition to this it is mentioned the lack of time limit as well as and the fact that C&IT may be extremely useful for some categories of people (eg. disabled people). *...I didn't care about the time and the place...I could join the discussion any time from any place. (Baluck) I was relaxing and I was communicating while I was drinking my coffee in my house...nobody knew it! (Fanney) …There are many days I am really tired but I should go to the class and share my ideas...C&IT is more flexible! (Pam)...I had the time to think before responding...that makes feel more confident about the meaning of my learning! I was responding only after I had understand the topic or the question (Liu)* On the other hand, there are disadvantages. Some people found difficult to communicate online due to the absence of body language and reflect open expressions of feelings. … *Although I believe there are times when this would be most useful (illness, disability, no transport) I missed the interaction of others! (Pam, student CET, 2001) ...It was great to interact this way, but I missed seeing people's faces, so I had to imagine them! (Jill)* Furthermore, some of the students who usually shy in face to face communication found the opportunity to lurk either because they had been ignored or either because they couldn't concentrate in the topic and follow the discussion. Liu was bit disappointed. She wrote: *i am a shy person so when I'm in class i feel like if i make a mistake everyone will laugh at me. i know one day I'll grow out of this but so far it hasn't changed. i can talk to friends but i guess it's like I'm on the spot and all eyes are me and that's a horrible feeling...online I lurk a lot, and sometimes chat on some interesting topics. I want to be more involved, by I rather just lurk. I'm scared I might say something dumb!* Panos, who really enjoyed the C&IT and he is very active in classroom situation as well added: *I for one talk more on these virtual discussions then I do in class. I feel that I can get my point across better, or my response is more thought out if I have a few minutes to think about it. I generally tend to chat while in these discussions. I do have a tendency to lurk though, but that is just so I can get an idea of everyone else's opinions, and to think how I feel about what they had to say then I comment. I don't think there is anything wrong with lurking; some people just aren't comfortable with speaking on a computer screen or in the classroom.*

COMPUTER-MEDIATED LANGUAGE

Looking at the discourse used by the participants it could be said that there was a tremendous amount of play with punctuation and spelling (Myers, 1987). Feelings were indicated by such things as the number of explanation marks, question marks or spelling like:..ohhhhhhhhh. All participants found extremely difficult to express their ideas, feelings and opinions online because

the majority weren't native English speakers and they faced problems in word selection and spelling. Moreover they were feeling uncertain about the messages they were communicating each other. *...Sometimes it takes me a long time to write a short sentence because I want to be sure that nobody will misunderstand my response. But still I am not sure!!! (Fanney) ...I had problem with the language, I had to think a lot before writing anything...I was checking my spelling and my vocabulary again and again and again!!! (Alvin) ...You cannot delete what you have said-think carefully what you want to say just as not to offend people! (Anonymous)* The discourse online was very different from that in the f2f situation. Online, although there were some very serious thoughts and opinions expressed, there was a good deal of 'chat-room' gossip. On the other hand, some participants, who use humor in f2f situation, show the same behavior online as well. For example, Panos wrote*: ...ok, I think that I am lost in space....over...over...does anyone receive message from earth?*. The responses to this contribution were full of humor as well. Fanney responded: '*Panos...over...Fanney online*!! According to Sudweeks (1998) the most common variety of playful language activity online is humor which seems to be more common online than off.

CONCLUSION

The human communication process is more complex than it initially seems. Experiential learning is an individual quest for meaning and relevance. Once learning moves beyond the recall of facts, principles or correct procedures, and into the area of creativity, problem –solving, analysis or evaluation, learners need to develop good interpersonal communication skills and create opportunities to question, challenge and discuss. Learning is as much a social as an individual activity. Therefore, we can't imagine people communicating just in electronic environment without the possibility of natural association in real places and real times. The needs of face-to-face communication cannot always be met by online communication, although it is possible to give non-verbal cues, learn to develop and express feelings online and to critically reflect and analyze our learning. In participating in this course this year, it became clear to us that critical reflection about experiences is a difficult skill to learn, even for people taught in an interactive, participatory environment. In an online environment we anticipate difficulties and barriers to effective participation and reflective thought. Students struggled to come to terms with a very different learning environment, that of experiential and reflective practice. In the end of the course unit evaluation students had said how difficult they found to work experientially. However, they found it to be a valuable and meaningful way of learning. The online conference experience provides other challenges: how to continue to work using this module without the face-to-face communication. Many found it to be frustrated yet stimulated experience and it served to give them additional insight into traditional group dynamics, with its may verbal and non verbal cues, by just having to focus on the single text-based channel of communication. Generally speaking, we would say that these two types of communication act additionally. Our purpose, as contemporary educators is to enable students to experience many different types of communication processes by understanding the complex nature of communication and its many facets. In this way we can all become more effective communicators.

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