Houston, we have a problem!

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CHAPTER 5

HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM!

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Issues raised

The issues raised by this case concern the use of an electronic listserv to foster teamwork among adult learners developing project management skills via distance learning.

Background

In an interactive multimedia subject, final year students are required to interact with industry clients and to develop a Web site to fulfill their business needs. The unit of study forms part of a three-year degree in multimedia and communications. Students receive online resources and have access to e-mail for tutor and peer feedback. In this particular unit, there were 60 students, most of whom had some work experience, and the age range was about 25 to 35 years. Several multimedia staff members and industry representatives attended the listserv, so students had a large field of expertise available to them when they needed information. There was no formal face-to-face contact with tutors. Although the listserv was used by students mainly to engage in teamwork and share of ideas, learning and management issues were also raised there.

PART 1

When we first started to plan the unit, one of the main questions we asked ourselves was: ‘How do we enable or encourage effective online discussions so that our students develop team skills?’ We agreed that an electronic discussion would be the best solution for both pragmatic and pedagogical reasons. As this unit aimed to develop students’ teamwork and project management skills, we wanted the learning experience to reflect real world communication. The assessment task required students to form teams and to create a Web site for an industry client. By careful unit design and task management we saw teamwork online as readily achievable and conducive to constructivist learning outcomes. For pragmatic reasons, an electronic listserv gave students the scope to brainstorm ideas, to discuss approaches and to collaborate online.

Unlike the other units in the degree programme, this one afforded no face-to-face contact with tutors. However, we thought online communication would provide learners with the opportunity to develop a ‘learning community’ that would encourage the sharing of perspectives and strategies, and recognize differences of opinion. So how did we plan to proceed? Our first step was to consider how we could provide an experiential learning environment for adult learners who were highly motivated, yet fairly new to online teamwork.

Joe and I had used authentic assessment (real world task as opposed to paper and pencil) in other courses and found that it was practical, realistic and challenging. Our assessment processes were very specific, with marks allocated for effective teamwork and for product development. This integration of process and product was something we had worked on carefully. The process skills that were assessed were the capacity to report on internal team dynamics, communication strategies and conflict resolution. The objective of the online dialogue and teamwork was to facilitate learning and collaboration as follows:

- There would be two-way discussion about conceptual issues of project management and multimedia design between experts and students.
- Each team would be able to showcase their product on a Web site and then offer constructive feedback to other teams online.
- There would be a close link between conceptual and practical issues, achieved through the team-based tasks.
- Student teams would be offered opportunities to build up understanding through discussion with others online.

With this attention to task and assessment design, we anticipated no real problems with the online interaction. As teachers, we had confidence in our capacity to manage the learning event and we intended to monitor the interaction carefully. Nevertheless, we gave the learners enough control and voice so that they would influence the educational experience.

The term commenced, and in the first couple of weeks the teams appeared to function quite well. Each day the listserv was chock-full of postings describing how teams had allocated roles and responsibilities to individual
team members. As moderators, our opening messages conveyed certain values such as tolerance, respect for diverse views, willingness to take risks and commitment to hard work. Nevertheless, some early comments by individuals showed that the listserv was being used to air personal views, problems and perspectives such as this message from Mike:

I was nominated 'Project Manager' for this unit by my team, but I didn't know the first thing about it! It is a good learning experience though.

Has anyone got feedback from their tutors saying that you need to put more into your assignments? It's easier said than done! Especially when you're working on 3 units and also working full-time.

As moderators we reflected on whether we were asking students to do too much. Were the content and teamwork too demanding? How should we respond to criticism? As this was a third year unit, we expected that students would have quite an extensive knowledge of project management, and this prior knowledge would be in evidence. However, we also expected that the listserv would have to develop its own sense of direction through the contributions of individual members and their interpretation of the assessment tasks. Joe responded:

If you are working full time and studying three units you are basically stressing yourself out and probably making your work and study suffer in some way. We assume that you have 8-9 hours to devote to the subject. I know that not all students have the luxury of studying full time, in which case you need to make a judgement about your own abilities and time management skills.

This did nothing but fan the flames of resentment, as Jeremy quickly told us:

How are we supposed to live? In a cave, hunting and gathering? At the risk of starting a political debate, youth allowance barely pays enough for petrol in the car, let alone the over-inflated cost of food at the cafeteria... I agree that time management is a huge factor in university life, however, you can't blame students for wanting to earn a buck. The world doesn't stop revolving when you're at university...

Another student, Olive, joined in to add some cynicism to the discussion:

If you have the choice, just concentrate on the study, and stick it out, ear pizza from rubbish bins, wear the same underwear 2 weeks in a row, drink stale beer at fashionable nightclubs...

Don't let the '2-3 years experience required' put you off, and don't do what your assignments ask for, do MORE!

While we were deciding what to do, another posting confirmed that some students were beginning to tire of the negativity and wanted to get back to the task. Another student, Alison, addressed those students who had complained:

Take your hard-luck story and tell it to people who actually care, this isn't what this listserv is about and it's already taken away from me time I should have been spending on my project.

At this point we wondered what was going to happen. Would the groups just turn on each other and abandon the idea of teamwork? Our plan to give students a voice was working really well, but would discussion go off the rails?

What do you think are the main issues here?
Could the problem have been avoided? Should it have been avoided?
If you faced this situation, what would you do now?
What do you think actually happened next?

PART 2

Believing in the capacity of our students to be self-directed, we did not intervene when they engaged in social interaction or complained of the stress of combining full-time work with study. We decided to listen to our students in the hope of learning something new. Real conversation, we told ourselves, is not opposition or confrontation, but accommodating. We suspended our beliefs and decided to trust the students in the hope of finding out more about their needs and worries. With Alison's comment and exhortations, a number of students rallied to her side, and asked others to devote time to the task rather than using the listserv for personal expression of viewpoints unrelated to the unit of study. With the imminent arrival of a due date for submission of a project plan for the client, the task seemed to establish a focus for group communication, and there were fewer postings in the category of personal complaints.

As online moderators our role was to facilitate development of a virtual community of learners, and we wanted to avoid being judgmental and critical of students' postings at this early stage. Being positive, we saw this initial round of off-task talk as an indication that the communication channel was working and Alison's message was a reminder to focus on the upcoming task and was taken on board. So we learnt two lessons from this first phase of discussion: first, that a social climate was vital to these students and second, that peers can also be active as moderators of discussion.

We did have some evidence of teamwork when teams posted examples of their project plans for peer comment. Would our role of supporting learning online be limited to sitting on the sidelines observing, merely engaging in management functions? As each team progressively worked with their
industry client they drew up a management plan that was posted for comment, and we provided positive feedback. The next stage involved creating the product, usually a Web site, for the client and providing a URL to other students to peruse the site and then post back constructive comments to the listerv. Quite unexpectedly, one team member, Rob, who had been very active and intent on the task, wrote a subject line which read, ‘Houston, we have a problem!’ with the following message:

What do you say when your team completely falls to pieces and one person tries to take it over? Well this is how our team seems to be working and I for one am not going to be part of it. That’s not on! Not only that but one team member gets a kick out of undoing our work and putting up his own ideas. I am having no part of this.

So we had a problem! The ‘one person’ was Rick, a friend of the client. He had decided that this team’s work was not up to standard, and then began making decisions on the product design without consulting the others. Stacey, another team member, joined in to defend Rob:

I like to be a very neutral person trying to calm the situation down as much as I can, but still diplomatically press the view that somebody has done something wrong within the team and towards my associates. But when I receive e-mail that is abusive, tells me that I haven’t done anything towards the project, and sweating is included, this is the limit! I allow abuse to a certain point and then react honestly don’t care any more about diplomacy, but I defend myself.

As the third team member, Tim, joined in to attack the culprit (Rick) there seemed to be an overwhelming weight of evidence that teamwork was abandoned and that Rick had decided to take over and change decisions that had been made through the group process. It came as no surprise to us that the other team members had begun to feel resentful and excluded. Worse, the brawl was public and others were beginning to take sides, leading to further backstabbing and personal attacks.

If confronted with this situation, what would you do? What do you think happened next?

PART 3

The listerv seemed to be heading for disaster, with one team feeling vulnerable about being attacked verbally, fearing that decisions were being made without consultation. The public nature of the dispute had contaminated other groups and resulted in loss of confidence in the communication medium. However, at least one student tried to offer the view that there was still openness and transparency about the communication - to the person who thinks that I am speaking behind their back on the listerv, this is an open channel... too bad! It is a good idea to try to work things out. As all our discussion was open until this point, as moderators we decided to use the medium to resolve the conflict. If Joe and I had chosen to phone the culprit and send out a stiff reprimand, it would have given the message that we too lacked confidence, not only in the medium, but also in our own skills as moderators.

Reflecting on our role as moderators, we realized that at an earlier part of the discussion, our approach was that of task management, occasionally switching to a consultancy role. We diagnosed the problem as follows:

- The role dynamics in this team had degenerated so that there was no longer agreement on roles.
- The boundaries between roles had become blurred so that one person was usurping the roles of others and imposing his ideas.
- Relationships began to deteriorate as team members no longer seemed to complement each other. Competition had replaced cooperation.
- Conflict emerged as team members experienced lack of trust and uncertainty, with the additional stress of not knowing which their contributions would be valued.

So what did we decide to do? My first thoughts were: 'We need to restore a feeling of psychological safety to these students. OK, the listerv has been abused by one or two to attack others, but equally it can be used to restore harmony and a sense of shared purpose.' Easier said than done, was Joe's answer. But we sat down and revisited our rationale for the listerv, and how we decided to use a set of learner-centred principles to design the learning tasks, assessment and the whole experience. If the students were to remain at the centre of the learning experience, we needed to assert that this was the case, and give them the scope to resolve this conflict themselves. In addition, not all the teams were dysfunctional! Many teams were effectively self-managing their own learning and communication needs. Looking on the bright side, we began to see that the conflict had brought about several unique and unexpected learning opportunities.

'So,' I said to Joe, 'Relax! Let's not worry about perfection. Our students are now facing a real issue of conflict resolution. Which way are we moving? Can we use this situation to enhance learning and sharpen the realization of teams that collaboration is not just easy? We could not hide the fact that conflict had occurred, so we decided to use it to our advantage. We advised all groups that successful completion of the assessment task was mandatory, and that if conflicts arose, they had to be resolved internally. Many teams were still working away on their Web sites, and team-based
learning was clearly successful for some. The team where the problems had occurred (Rick's team) was given a turn to present the product they had been working on. This allowed them to display their plan, Web site and rationale. Other students received the product with mixed reviews, which allowed the other members of the problem team to demonstrate their skills in design and to return to the drawing board.

We then asked the online groups to consider how best to work in teams and encouraged group discussion of conflict resolution. We invited all teams to share their experiences of how they resolved conflicts and issues, with the aim of bringing out into the open pathways for improved communication and cooperation. This brought about another wave of postings to the listserver, such as the following:

In my personal experience, I believe the skills needed to work effectively as a team are developed over time and we have been lucky enough to have this year to shape up and prepare for the real world... (James)

Instead of naming names, blaming, and producing an all out brawl, the team should sit down and be led by one person initially, brainstorm and analyse the various phases of the completed project and then suggestions are made as to what contributed to the team's success or what caused the disaster, if there was one. (Trevor)

In our project it wasn't one individual but the whole that realized the depth of the problem and devised the solution for our site. A long-winded way of saying this is that our project was a collaborative team effort where ideas were elaborated, refined, abandoned, perfected, abandoned, etc until a final solution was reached. (Marg)

This exercise had a cathartic effect and more positive feelings began to emerge about the process. In fact, the reflective process of seeking openness on the problem team's progress, warts and all, was something all groups seemed to enjoy. So the listserver was back in action and serving the learning needs of both teams and individuals. We had survived the hiccups and interpersonal dramas.

What lessons might e-moderators learn from this experience? What does it tell you about the problems of teamwork online? Can students be left to themselves in an online discussion, or does there need to be teacher direction?

CASE REPORTERS' DISCUSSION

From the point of view of designing and planning the learning environment, our initial focus on tasks proved a good starting point. In the first round of discussion, where students began to quibble about the hardships of study and excessive assessment demands, we did not try to stifle these contributions. Our initial commitment to student-centred learning was continued systematically throughout the whole unit, as we believed that a learner-centred environment offered the most appropriate pedagogy for adult experiential learning. (See Bonk and King, 1998, for discussion of how the cognitive, metacognitive, motivational and affective concerns of learners can be integrated into a learning setting.)

Our hunch was that if we gave students control over the listserv, that is, if we gave them boundaries to work within and a task focus, they would use it effectively. We had confidence that students would return to the main agenda of the unit, which was to work in teams to create a product for a client. Ultimately it was students who asserted that others should stop the negativity and return to the task ('This is not what the listserv is about...'). As moderators, allowing students to steer the group back towards the task worked well and affirmed their status as adult learners.

The initial conversations showed that the teams had a number of transition points. Initially, there was a feeling that the unit was all too much, and that tutor expectations were far too great, leading to individual postings. Airing of views probably created feelings of group solidarity, though the chat was 'off-task'. As moderators we trusted the groups to form through this initial phase of socialization.

We looked at the interplay of emotions and learning. For the most part, we noticed curiosity, fascination, engagement, confusion, enthusiasm, anxiety, boredom, frustration, disappointment, insight, satisfaction, and both positive and negative demonstrations of confidence in the listserver. So what did we do? First we emphasized the importance of roles within teams and the importance of being clear about how roles and responsibilities are delegated and carried out. The assessment tasks were designed to affirm role maintenance, while allowing students to build cohesion within teams around individual strengths and interests.

When the team problem occurred and individuals wrote abusive comments, anxiety and disappointment were evident when participants felt their efforts were not appreciated. We realized that negativity can easily creep in, poison relationships and arrest learning. Again, we turned to task and role maintenance, and tried to refocus the groups without appearing too heavy-handed. By fostering reflective, open comments on group processes we conveyed the message, 'Hey, it's OK not to be a perfect team... but don't make enemies.'

As group and individual postings showed, there was a mix of feelings about the benefits of group work, but the majority realized that this experience was "a real world experience" and that teamwork is the responsibility of everybody, not a magic formula that changes individuals into partners overnight.

We allowed as much interaction as students wanted, and rarely intervened to inhibit or limit contributions. Was this a good approach? We believe it was,
as we wanted the whole process to be team centred and collaborative. Initially, we were a little too concerned with keeping the discussion away from the personal and the interpersonal. In fact these interpersonal dynamics brought teams together and consolidated online relationships. We experienced gut-wrenching moments when we could feel the discussion going off on a tangent. Our first reaction was to intervene and say to the groups, ‘Enough of this!’ However, if we had done so, it would have betrayed a lack of trust in our learners, and a departure from our belief that e-learning is a unique context where learner-centred principles mean that students become the centre of the learning environment. Although we chose to be non-interventionist, there was another choice we could have made. We could have intervened in a non-directive way by saying, ‘Now what we are seeing here is a breakdown of team skills and communication. How can we resolve this?’ It might have worked, but we decided to focus on the task and at the same time give groups the opportunity to use their expertise and experience to reflect on and share the experience of how their own team functioned.

One question we still ask ourselves is, ‘How do we create a psychologically safe environment online, and yet not protect participants from the natural cut and thrust of human interaction when groups try to form and create a joint product?’ In the course of the semester, one team fell apart briefly, but with mediation it survived. We believe that flexibility, a clear task focus and attention to roles and responsibilities where students act in partnership with others towards a common outcome creates a positive e-learning environment.

Next time round, what would we do differently? Certainly, going into the unit as moderators, we didn’t have clear ideas as to what our roles might be. We saw ourselves mostly as electronic mentors, able to give advice when needed, but hoping to be non-interventionist. In our experience, this team-centred environment online showed us that the moderator needs to balance three overlapping process roles: task orientation, social organization and management of learning needs. Easier said than done!

Reference