

Chapter V

Certain about Uncertainty: Strategies and Practices for Virtual Teamwork in Online Classrooms

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Abstract

Many students face the prospect of working in teams with apprehension. This feeling is further magnified when most or all of the sensory cues are removed in the virtual environment. We argue that by adopting specific structural and situational strategies, instructors can substantially reduce

the levels of uncertainty that usually surround the idea of virtual teamwork in students' minds. Such strategies are drawn from an exploration of the notion of trust as a key element for the successful performance of teams, as well as on a discussion of the concepts of swift trust, community of practice, and control as guiding principles for the establishment of practices that help build mutual reliance among virtual team members in an online classroom. We conclude with some suggestions that can be implemented at the micro level of the course and the macro level of the institution hosting distance and online learning experiences.

Introduction

“We believe we are experiencing the most dramatic change in the nature of the small group since humans acquired the capacity to talk to one another — the explosion of virtual teams”
(Lipnack & Stamps, 1997, Chapter 2, ¶ 5).

Small human groups have existed for thousands upon thousands of years. These groups were key to the existence of humankind beginning with the Nomadic Age. Their acquisition of food depended on group work. This reality of pre-civilized life becomes especially evident when one considers the mastodon. Mastodons were rather formidable creatures, yet we know that in distant millennia, our predecessors stalked, hunted, and killed them. Among the sites containing evidence of this practice is the Taima-Taima site in coastal Venezuela. Fragments of tools and bones uncovered here revealed that groups were formed to hunt these woolly behemoths, and that they were butchered down to the bone. Facing an animal weighing five tons that towered over them, hunters must have experienced the twin rushes of hope and fear. Yet the reward — food — was greater than the fear of death or the fear of being maimed by a potential repast. The passage from childhood to becoming a hunter must have had moments of terror, but also feelings of kinship and trust for fellow hunters.

Today, the students' passage from adolescence to adulthood is far more prolonged; moreover, the complexity of their lives has often precluded the need to work in a group. Or, if they have been members of a group, their experience might have been negative. Many students, therefore, face the prospect of

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