Chapter 42

Gender and Collaborative Knowledge Building in an Online Community of Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the implications of gender on participation, collaboration, and ultimately shared understanding and proposes a framework in which to examine collaborative knowledge building. Collaborative knowledge building depends more on the learning context and group member role than on gender exclusively. The collaborative knowledge-building process begins when group members become ready to participate by creating a welcoming climate, feeling emotionally and cognitively comfortable, and formulating initial thoughts on the discussion topic, among other activities. Connecting with one another to collaborate includes brainstorming, challenging perceptions, ensuring equality of voices, stretching their individual perspectives, and sharing experiences over time. Members achieve shared understanding by creating a new, joint perspective that emerges from their collective contributions.

INTRODUCTION

The promise of online group learning is that computer-mediated communication offers more opportunities for members to participate equally (Zafeiriou, Nunes, & Ford, 2001) and interdependently (Curtis, 2004). Text-based chats are one way instructors can provide a space for learners to share their experiences and build connections as they explore complex issues in an informal way.

Learner-moderated chats that have clearly defined goals can build shared understanding (Stein et al., 2007). However, a group posting that purports to reflect a shared perspective may hide inequalities in participation and collaboration. Selwyn, Gorard, and Furlong (2006) suggest that online learning, by its very nature, creates inequalities for women. This chapter addresses the implications of gender on participation, collaboration, and ultimately shared understanding and proposes a framework with which to examine collaborative knowledge building.

Despite Ryan and David's (2003) contention that knowing is not intrinsically related to gender, a number of researchers have built on the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) to suggest that women have a preference for learning through connectedness (Burge, 1993; Guiller & Durndell, 2006). Connected knowing is rooted in the experience of relationships and is characterized by empathy, equality, genuine caring, and withholding judgment (Belenky et al., 1986), as shown in this chat exchange from the course under study:

Gabi[1]: Honestly, I have a hard time with this chat because I want to talk strictly about what I read and not what the reading applys [sic] to in today's world.

Fran: I can understand, Gabi.

Gabi: I have a hard time with that.

Steve: No worries, this is our chance to learn.

Fran is empathetic and caring when Gabi discloses her difficulty building on the readings to answer the course discussion questions. Steve withholds judgment of Gabi's inability to focus. But four weeks later, Steve entered the chat as the moderator and dominated the discussion to such an extent that he was responsible for producing nearly half of the conversation. "Our chance to learn" became predominately his chance to learn. What conditions brought about that inequality? This case study examined the extent to which gender might influence collaborative knowledge building in an online discussion group and explored the process of achieving shared understanding in that environment.

BACKGROUND

Constructivist educators generally agree that communities of inquiry create knowledge and contribute to higher-order thinking (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Lindsey & Berger, 2009; Lipman, 2003). Unlike approaches to distance education that value autonomy and separate knowing (Hannifin, Land, & Oliver, 1983; Moore, 1972), the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model used as the basis of this study values collaborative learning through discussion. The CoI framework assumes that learning occurs through the interaction of three overlapping elements: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Anderson, Rourke, Archer, & Garrison, 2001; Garrison et al., 2000). According to Garrison et al., teaching presence involves course design and administration, discourse facilitation, and direct instruction in text-based computer conferencing environments. Social presence is the ability of learners to "identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities" (Arbaugh et al., 2008, p. 134). Cognitive presence involves meaning-making through sustained communication (Garrison et al.). Arbaugh et al. (2008) and Rourke and Kanuka (2009) call for more quantitative measures to assess the impact of the CoI framework on learning. This study suggests an approach for examining the process of collaborative knowledge building as influenced by gender. To enhance the understanding of what occurs in a discussion as it relates to gender, this chapter combines the Community of Inquiry framework with other ways of knowing (Belenky et al., 1986).

Of particular interest to this study is the dialogue that signals (a) readiness to participate in a discussion and (b) connecting to other learners to collaborate in knowledge building. Lock (2002) has proposed that participation and collaboration are among the cornerstones for the development

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