



Team members' perceptions of online teamwork learning experiences and building teamwork trust: A qualitative study

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 August 2012

Received in revised form

10 November 2012

Accepted 25 November 2012

Keywords:

Distance education and telelearning

Cooperative/collaborative learning

Teaching/learning strategies

Adult learning

Learning communities

ABSTRACT

Teamwork factors can facilitate team members, committing themselves to the purposes of maximizing their own and others' contributions and successes. It is important for online instructors to comprehend students' expectations on learning collaboratively. The aims of this study were to investigate online collaborative learning experiences and to identify important factors that were crucial for building teamwork trust. A qualitative research method was utilized in the study. Data were collected from students' responses of three open-ended questions and interviews. The results indicated that students who enjoyed working in the group setting had a good relationship with their team members and they trusted their team members. In contrast, the questionable behaviors of members (lack of communication and low level of individual accountability) were negative factors of their teamwork experiences. In addition, students considered individual accountability, familiarity with team members, commitment toward quality work, and team cohesion were important factors for building trust with team members. Quantitative analyses confirmed that teamwork trust was correlated significantly with two of the important factors for building trust indicated by team members: familiarity with members ($r = .74$) and team cohesion ($r = .79$). Implications and recommendations for future research were also discussed.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Online collaborative learning

Collaborative learning is an instructional strategy that encourages students to work in a group toward the same goals (Brindley, Walti, & Blaschke, 2009). In collaborative learning, students engage in their own knowledge construction by integrating new information and knowledge networks into a learning community. Schrage (1990) described collaboration as a "process of shared creation: two or more individuals with complementary skills interacting to create a shared understanding that none had previously processed or could have come to on their own. Collaboration creates a shared meaning about a process, a product, or event" (p. 40). Students learning collaboratively as a team can gain their skills on problem solving, social interaction and communication, positive attitude toward learning, and critical thinking (Law, 2011; Lehtinen, 2003; Nam & Zellner, 2011; Srinivas, 2008). Despite the advantages reported in literature about collaborative instructional strategy in terms of social and psychological benefits (Amhag & Jakobsson, 2009; Biasutti, 2011; Panitz, 1999), students can feel a high level of frustration in online collaborative learning activities (Capdeferro & Romero, 2012). Capdeferro and Romero's study found that difficulties in communication, the lack of shared, and the imbalance in the level of commitment could lead students to frustrations. The poor problem-solving and decision-making skills, and relationship conflicts could threaten the success of the collaborative learning process (Korkmaz & Yesil, 2011).

1.2. Online teamwork processes

Different teams have their own unique processes intended to improve the effectiveness and productivity needed for achieving the team's goals. Team processing exists when team members concentrate on completing the task and know how well they are achieving the goals and

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maintaining effective working patterns. Johnson and Johnson (2000) defined team processing as “reflecting on a group session to (a) describe what member actions were helpful and unhelpful and (b) make decisions about what actions to continue or change” (p. 113). In other words, all members should work together to identify and clarify their own cooperative patterns over time. When the team’s processes reach the most appropriate condition and all members work on mutual accountability, the team can get on with the task on hand quickly and consistently to get the job done effectively. Marks, Mathieu, and Zaccaro (2001) defined teamwork processes as “members’ interdependent acts that convert inputs to outcomes (e.g. product development, rate of work, team commitment, and satisfaction) through cognitive, verbal, and behavioral activities directed toward organizing taskwork to achieve collective goals. Centrally, teamwork processes involve members’ interacting with other members and their task environment (e.g. expertise and instructional equipment)” (p. 357). Teamwork processes can promote students’ critical thinking, help them make better decisions in problem-solving situations by sharing different experience and expertise, and enable them to clarify ideas and keep on the right track through discussion and debate. Teamwork processes are vital for the long-term effectiveness of the team.

1.3. Online teamwork trust

Traditionally, trust is assumed to build gradually within teams over time based on an individual’s cognitive assessment of the other person’s behavior (Robert, Dennis, & Hung, 2009). However, the lack of shared social context and limitations on personal interaction and communication among team members in virtual teams decrease the potential for trust. Trust on a collaborative level is more complicated and more pivotal than dyadic trust because the collaborative relationships involve multiple trustees, each with different attributes. Cummings and Bromiley (1996) asserted that a person trusts a group when he or she believes that the group “(a) makes a good-faith effort to behave in accordance with any commitments both explicit or implicit, (b) is honest in whatever negotiations preceded such commitments, and (c) does not take excessive advantage of another even when the opportunity is available” (p. 303). In this study, trust is defined as “an emergent state comprising team member intentions to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of the intentions or behavior of the members of the team” (Kiffin-Petersen, 2004, p. 39). Teamwork factors can facilitate team members, committing themselves to the purposes of maximizing their own and others’ contributions and successes. In the aspect of building trust among teammates, those who trust each other feel that they are working toward the same goal and are making their best efforts to promote successful teamwork if they earn the trust from one another. Trust among teammates may be built “through sharing one’s thoughts, ideas, conclusions, and feelings and having the other group members respond with acceptance, support and reciprocation of disclosures” (Johnson & Johnson, 2000, p. 32). Good communication among team members comes with good team spirit, building this “all-in-the-family feeling”, and there is a good team performance culture (Hill & McShane, 2008). In addition, a team with high level of trust is more likely to see the spirit of cooperation and information sharing among members (Peters & Karren, 2009), even with low level of shared expertise (Curşeu & Schrujier, 2010; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). In term of team cohesion, O’Reilly, Caldwell, and Barnett (1989) defined it as “attraction to the group, satisfaction with other members of the group, and social interaction among the group members” (p. 22). Team cohesion allows team members to bind together, communicate more effectively to coordinate their efforts (Deutsch, Marcus, & Brazaitis, 2012), and enables the group to remain intact and productive in spite of difficulties, which in turn promotes trust.

1.4. Aims of the study and research questions

The aims of this study were to investigate online collaborative learning experiences and to identify important factors that were crucial for building teamwork trust from individual member’s perspective. The research questions that guided the investigation in this study were as follows:

1. What are team members’ perceptions of online teamwork learning experiences?
2. What are team members’ perceptions of building online trust experiences with their teammates in the collaborative learning environment?

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The participants were fifteen graduate students who were enrolled in an instructional design online course at a mid-west university in the United States. Among the fifteen participants, twelve were females and three were males. In addition, twelve students were working toward their master’s degree and three were working toward their doctoral degree. Only three students indicated that they had participated in an online collaborative learning environment.

The instructional design course has been offered as an on-line course and taught using collaborative instructional strategy since 2002 at this university. It is a 15-week course designed to teach students how to create effective, efficient, and appealing self-paced instructions. Each team was required to complete four design documents and one self-paced instructional unit. Those five projects were each due in every three weeks. The estimate hours needed for teams to complete each assignment were six hours. Maximum possible score of Project 1 was 10, Project 2 was 15, Project 3 was 10, Project 4 was 5, and Project 5 was 15.

During the first week, the course instructor randomly assigned three or four students to each collaboration team and four teams were consequently formed. Team 1 (Cate, Cindy, and Doris) consisted of three students and they were all from the same academic backgrounds (Educational Technology). Team 2 (Jessica, Mary, Sam, and Tiffany), Team 3 (Betty, Martin, Sally, and Susan), and Team 4 (Catherine, Chris, Debra, and Diana) consisted of four students with diverse academic backgrounds. All participants received an email notice from the researcher with the consent form describing the purpose of the study, researcher’s contact information, and time (15–20 min) to fill out the questionnaire. Pseudonyms were used to maximize anonymity of the participants’ identity. See Table 1 for the information of the fifteen participants.

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