Toward a social conflict evolution model: Examining the adverse power of conflictual social interaction in online learning

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This case study examined an authentic online learning phenomenon where social conflict, including harsh critique and negative tone, weaved throughout peer-moderated online discussions in an online class. Opening coding and content analysis were performed on 1306 message units and course artifacts. The results revealed that a model of social conflict evolution, that is, social conflict within the learning community evolved through five general phases including cultural initiation, social harmonization cycle, escalation of conflict, intervention and stabilization, and adjourning. The results also suggested strong relationships between social and learning interactions during these five phases of social conflict development. This study has theoretical and practical implications for designing and managing learning activities in online classes.

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1. Introduction

The positive impact of social interaction on student learning has been well documented in educational research (e.g., Wentzel, 1998, 2005), yet the adverse power of social interaction is an under-studied area. The examination of social conflict in an online learning community can provide valuable insight to help instructors develop management plans to promote the positive impact of knowledge construction while reducing the negative influence of social conflict in online learning. Although research on conflict management strategies in an online learning environment exists (e.g., DeChurch & Marks, 2001; Hammond, 2003), the dynamic process of social conflict development in online learning has not been adequately studied. An in-depth investigation of social conflict development, evolution, and the relationships between social and learning interactions is warranted and may bring theoretical and practical implications to distance learning.

2. Social conflict in online learning

2.1. Relationship between social interaction and online learning

Studies have repeatedly shown the significant relationship between social interaction and learning in online classes (e.g., Brush, 1998; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Gunawardena, 1995; Wagner, 1994). Rovai (2007) suggests that the social component of online interaction is vital for the success of online collaborative learning. Social interactions support the establishment of *social presence* – the ability to project themselves socially and emotionally as real people in the learning community of distance classes (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). Social interactions enhance self-awareness and awareness of others in the learning community (Cutler, 1995). Social interactions also "support cognitive objectives through the ability to instigate, sustain, and support critical thinking in a community of learners" (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999, p. 54). For example, Caspi and Blau (2008) found that social

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interactions positively correlated with students' perceived learning. Xie and Ke (2011) found that social interactions significantly correlated with information sharing and allocentric elaboration of online learning. Therefore, the benefits of social interactions in online learning are evident. Yet little research has examined the negative aspects of social interaction in online learning settings.

2.2. Impact of social conflict

Social conflict exists whenever incompatible activities occur (Deutsch, 1973). Social conflict is "the extent to which the open expression of anger and aggression and generally conflictual interactions are characteristic" of a social group (Billings & Moos, 1982, pp. 300–301). Social conflict can be created by students demonstrating their competence in comparison to their peers leading to competitive confrontations. Social conflict has been shown to hinder individuals' cognitive activities in a learning community (Darnon & Butera, 2007; Darnon, Butera, & Harackiewicz, 2007; Darnon, Harackiewicz, Butera, Mugny, & Quiamzade, 2007; Doise & Mugny, 1984). Buchs, Butera, Darnon, and Mugny (2004) suggest that social conflict can lead students to experience more uncertainty, more internal distress, and derogate their partner to a greater extent.

The development of social conflict can be even more dramatic in online learning settings. Students in online classes are isolated physically but connected through computer networks. Learning activities are commonly situated in text-based media environments like discussion forums (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). In these situations, students cannot take advantage of extra-linguistic cues such as seeing discussion participants, hearing their tone of voice, and sensing the atmosphere within the classroom to help resolve any social conflict that may arise. Because of the absence of these extra-linguistic cues, online students may encounter even more difficulties in managing social conflicts (Walker, 2004). Social conflict resolution is also limited by the nature of distance education, given that instructors and students are often off-site, thereby not providing for face-to-face mediation of issues.

2.3. Culture of online learning community

The culture of learning communities in online classes share some common characteristics, including new rules and class norms, online etiquette, and disinhibition. Each influences social conflict development (Conrad, 2002; Suler, 2004; Weiberger et al., 2005).

2.3.1. New rules and class norms
Students encounter many new rules and classroom norms in online classes that are different from those in traditional face-to-face classrooms (Gunawardena, 1995; Weiberger et al., 2005). For example, student–instructor and student–student relationships become more reciprocal as instructors and students take turns playing the role of facilitator in collaborative learning. Self-regulation becomes a critical requirement for a successful learning experience (Salovaara, 2005). These new rules and norms of learning challenge students' existing epistemological beliefs of learning: instructors must facilitate the learning experience, rather than control it, and students must work interdependently and accept responsibility for one another's learning (Smith, 2008). This challenge creates emotional tension for students and may then threaten their perceived belongingness to the learning community, which can cause social conflict. Lave and Wenger's (1993) research suggests that participants in online activities need to learn the unique rules and the tools for working within a learning community. Failure to obtain this essential knowledge can lead to a learner being excluded and isolated from the community of learners and create social conflict (Hodges, 1998).

2.3.2. Netiquette: the art of niceness
According to sociology research, students often present an identity with positive social value and want to have that identity validated by other class members (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Goffman, 1967). Students in online classes generally are able to establish a clear understanding of acceptable etiquette to properly interact with other class members (Mintu-Wimsatt, Kernek, & Lozada, 2010). The word "netiquette" emerged in the literature combing the words of "network" and "etiquette" (Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997), which refers to a set of guidelines for online communication to ensure common courtesy (Shea, 1994). The netiquette of an online learning community often involves politeness, respect, harmony, and tolerance (Brown, 2001; Curtis & Lawson, 2001). Conrad (2002) suggested that online students often demonstrate trust-building efforts with respect, support, caring, and encouragement in order to build positive relations with each other and to maintain the "niceness" culture of the learning community. She found that most students have strong desire to behave well socially in online classes, while simultaneously they have a high tolerance for questionable behaviors. Researchers also have suggested that the quality of online learning increases when netiquette is well observed by students (Buelens, Totte, Deketelaere, & Dierickx, 2007; Schallert et al., 2009). Netiquette enhances the relationship of class members, promotes the relatedness and belongingness to the learning community, and often can effectively constrain social conflict events involved in the learning community (Schallert et al., 2009; Yang, Tsai, Kim, Cho, & Laffey, 2006).

2.3.3. Online disinhibition
In online learning, the disinhibition effect of the Internet often becomes salient. The online disinhibition effect occurs when people behave differently on the Internet than they would normally do face-to-face (e.g., Joinson, 2007). For instance, people can be extremely outspoken online, while awfully shy in offline settings. Suler (2004) suggested that six factors of online interaction create the disinhibition effect, including dissociative anonymity, invisibility, asynchronicity, solipsistic introjection, dissociative imagination, and minimization of authority. Although some of these factors are not pertinent to or have weaker impact in online learning settings, for instance, compared to non-educational social activities, online learning interactions offer students a much stronger sense of cognition, teaching, and social presence within a community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001), and often are lack of anonymity (Conrad, 2002), the disinhibition effect still shows significant influences on students' online learning behavior (Chester, 2006; Chester & Gwynne, 1998). The effects of disinhibition can be benign or toxic (Chester, 2006; Suler, 2004). Benign disinhibition promotes students' engagement in online learning, while toxic disinhibition can cause social conflict (Chester & Gwynne; Chester). The computer-mediated communication can increase social confidence and overcome shyness for individuals to join in active online learning and show kindness and generosity to help others – the