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Sundra Wall Williams

North Carolina State University, USA

Karen Watkins

University Of Georgia at Athens, USA

Barbara Daley

University Of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, USA

Bradley Courtenay

University Of Georgia at Athens, USA

Mike Davis

University of Manchester, UK

See next page for additional authors

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Author Information

Sundra Wall Williams, Karen Watkins, Barbara Daley, Bradley Courtenay, Mike Davis, and Darryl Dymock

Facilitating Cross-Cultural Online Discussion Groups: Issues and Challenges

Sandra Wall Williams, North Carolina State University, USA

Karen Watkins, University Of Georgia at Athens, USA

Barbara Daley, University Of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, USA

Bradley Courtenay, University Of Georgia at Athens, USA

Mike Davis, University of Manchester, UK

Darryl Dymock, Flinders University, South Australia

Abstract: This action research identifies the issues and challenges experienced by facilitators who moderated cross-cultural group discussion activities in an online environment. This study found that in a cross-cultural online environment, the challenges of the facilitator expand beyond the currently identified range of problems for online discussion.

Introduction

Increasingly technology is becoming an integral part of collaborative learning in educational institutions. One of the major issues within the context of instructional technology is that of interactivity which is critical to the success of the online learning experience. Incorporated into the methods and techniques used in online courses should be strategies that allow for sharing of information, information gathering, collaborative problem solving and questioning (White, 2000). The most commonly used method to facilitate the gathering of this type of information is online discussion groups.

Online discussion is a powerful tool for the development of critical thinking, collaboration, and reflection and has several benefits for participants of the discussion. However, group interactions are difficult and complex in an online environment where a clear sense of personal presence is difficult to maintain. Cues such as eye contact, body language, facial expression, and voice tones that generally govern social interaction are absent, and so the facilitator of the discussion group has to find ways alleviate the effects of these differences (Holt, Kleiber, Swenson, Rees, Milton, 1998). When the construct of cross-cultural participants is added to the existing challenges of facilitation in an online environment, the problems are intensified. Cultural problems such as linguistic misunderstandings, misunderstandings of cultural context cues, and online participation differences can be added to the list of online facilitative challenges.

The purpose of this research was to identify issues and challenges related to facilitating cross-cultural discussion groups in an online environment. This research was guided by the question: "What challenges or issues are encountered while facilitating cross-cultural discussion groups in an online environment?"

In order to answer the question, this study:

1. Elicited problem information via interviews from five (5) pre-determined faculty who are part of a cohort research group and who have facilitated in an online cross-cultural (cross-institutional and cross-cultural diversity) environment.
2. Utilized the technology of web-conferencing software to support discussions about challenges and issues encountered by the facilitators while working in a cross-cultural online environment.

Review of Related Literature

There are no standard guidelines for facilitation in an online discussion. Hence, an important assumption is that the facilitation guidelines in a traditional environment can be modified and applied to the online environment. The framework to review facilitation in this study was based on nine guidelines identified by Rogers (1969). These nine basic guidelines provide a link between traditional and online facilitation (Addesso, 2000).

1. The facilitator is largely responsible for setting the initial mood or climate of the program.
2. The facilitator helps to elicit and clarify the purposes of the individuals in the class as well as the more general purposes of the group.
3. The facilitator relies upon the desire of each student to implement those purposes, which have meaning to him or her as the motivational force behind significant learning.
4. The facilitator endeavors to organize and make easily available the widest possible range of resources for learning.
5. The facilitator regards himself or herself as a flexible resource to be utilized by the group.
6. As the classroom climate becomes established, the facilitator is increasingly able to become a participant learner, a member of the group, expressing his or her views as an individual.
7. The facilitator takes the initiative in sharing himself or herself with the group - in ways which neither demand nor impose, but represent simply a personal sharing which the student may take or leave.
8. Throughout the course, the facilitator remains alert to expressions indicative of deep or strong feelings.
9. The facilitator endeavors to recognize and accept his or her own limitations as a facilitator and learner.

Responsibilities of the Facilitator in Online Discussion Groups

The role and responsibilities of the facilitator in an online learning environment is critical to the success of the collaborative dialog of an online discussion; however, only four studies have focused on the facilitator of online discussion groups. Mason (1991) studied interactivity and verified that facilitators play a major role in directing online discussions. Burge (1994) identified behaviors that were vital to being effective online educators. Addesso (2000) identified six advanced facilitation skills: demonstrating an open and accepting attitude; clarify meanings; connecting ideas to expertise; integrating materials over time; empowering and motivating others; and maintaining a group learning environment. Holt, Kleiber, Swenson, Rees, and Milton (1998) identified six responsibilities of online facilitators: creating the learning environment,

guiding the process, providing points of departure, moderating the process, managing the content, and creating community.

Issues relating to cross-cultural online facilitation

Several authors (Milton and Holt, 1998; Burge 1994; Reinhart 1998) have introduced problems, concerns, and issues relating to online facilitation as they relate to facilitating groups in a single culture. These challenges include accessibility to tools, silent group participants, encouraging participation and online etiquette, loss of face-to-face social interaction, responsive feedback, volume of generated data from discussions, funneling ideas and discussions to achieve decisions, and identifying resistance. Other common problems identified were dealing with participants who are noncontributors, monopolizers, or distracters.

Research Design

The strategy used for data collection, analysis, and interpretation in this study was action research. Action research is a qualitative research paradigm which allows the researcher to develop knowledge or understanding as a part of practice. It concerns actual, not abstract practices and involves learning about real, concrete, particular practices. Action research techniques allow for the researcher to improve an understanding of current practice while conducting and/or participating in research. In action research, action and critical reflection take place at the same time. The reflection is used to review the previous action and plan the next one (Jarvis, 1999; Kemmis and Wilkinson, 1998; Marsick & Watkins, 1999).

Research Participants

For this action research, instructors from five adult education graduate classes located in the United States, England, and Australia participated as facilitators of the online cross-cultural discussion groups and they constituted the research participants. The faculty members had experience as facilitators of online discussion groups or had been trained on the techniques of effective group facilitation. These five faculty participated as facilitators in a seven week online course called "Cross-cultural Reflection on Work-based Learning". The purpose of the course was to create a working laboratory in which online reflection, actual practice experiences, and critical questioning were used as a means to explore interpersonal competence and learning from experience.

Data Collection and Analysis

The facilitators of the cross-cultural online discussion groups participated in an online discussion (using the web-conferencing software Facilitate.com) of the issues, challenges, and difficulties they encountered while facilitating online discussions with students during the course. The purpose of the facilitator online discussion was for the facilitators to describe specific problems, ask questions and seek answers of the other facilitators, reflect on the responses given, and determine some possible conclusions or develop some insight into how they would do things differently next time.

Data from the facilitators was analyzed for themes and ideas for action by using a constant comparative method according to Glaser and Strauss (1967) in order to ascertain specific challenges and issues encountered while facilitating in an online cross-cultural environment.

Findings

Findings from this study indicated seven primary categories of challenges for facilitators of cross-cultural online discussion groups. These seven categories are: (1) framing, asking questions and reframing information; (2) online group participation; (3) absence of face to face meetings; (4) learning the interpersonal and group dynamics of online work; (5); expectations of students; (6) facilitator expectations; and (7) facilitator anxiety.

Framing, asking questions and reframing information

One of the things that generally happens when online groups probe deeply into the underlying dynamics of a problem, is that they begin to see that the original perspective on the problem was incorrect. One role of the facilitator was to ask questions to help frame and reframe cases. Here is an example of the difficulty of that task:

One of the issues for me also, is how you frame your thinking when you work on these cases. Do you find yourself going back to the case and all the comments before you frame a response? How do you maintain the flow of thoughts when you are checking in and out? This is something that has been of interest to me from a learning, reflection and analysis perspective?

Online group participation

Two issues about participation were highlighted: when should the facilitator intervene and how do you handle a lack of participation from the students.

One of the things I have taken away from this case experience is the need for consistent participation. . . . it was hard at times to get a sense of where the group was, and I know that I contributed to that getting into the discussion late. When I did come in it felt hard to "catch up" as so much of the discussion was out there already and I found myself thinking where can I make a contribution and how can I enter the discussion. I think that participation while the ideas are developing will be more valuable to all the group members. With that in mind, I was thinking of having a chat with my students about how to carve out time to participate.

Absence of face to face meetings

Because of the cross-cultural and cross-institutional make up of the discussion groups, not all facilitators had the opportunity for face to face meetings with the groups. The facilitators who did not meet face to face raised concerns about the absence of face to face meetings:

My own expectations have changed (been reconstructed?) during the past 10 days from basic concerns about process and structure of this conference on a bit of a technical rationality level to looking at my reactions as a participant. On that level I learned how important the idea and the presence of the group is to me. Though I may not be able to see faces and gestures, the written word provides a powerful means of establishing connections - not just between me and the case writer but hopefully among all of the group members and that much of my

personal learning comes from the dialogue among the members that weaves and links ideas together.

Interpersonal and group dynamics of online work

Online facilitators recognize that online discussions are social entities as well as a place where people learn (White 2000). Developing interpersonal and group dynamics are critical to the success of online discussion groups. Understanding the dynamics of the groups did present problems for the facilitators:

Though I may not be able to see faces and gestures, the written word provides a powerful means of establishing connections - not just between me and XXX but hopefully among all of the group members and that much of my personal learning comes from the dialogue among the members that weaves and links ideas together. There have been times during this case that I felt very vulnerable without a sense of group and other times that even though there were lots of people here, I still wasn't sure where the group was. And these realizations lead to thoughts about facilitating students in similar groups in the coming weeks. And what can we take from our own experience that will help our facilitation of the learning?

Expectation of students

Online communications weaken social differences, which are apparent in face to face communications. Therefore, online facilitators are not awarded authority or expertise because they may look the part. Traditional students in a face to face environment tend to accept facilitators' viewpoints, while online students more readily question and challenge facilitator opinions (White 2000).

Reading XXX's case and the other comments raises really interesting questions about what our expectations are of our students . . . and the extent to which we explicate that. I too have faced the 'Is that what you meant?' response - one student even challenged me over whether having to 'successfully complete' an assignment actually meant having to obtain a pass.

Facilitator expectations

The facilitators did not identify their expectations at the beginning of the course; however, they did reflect and give comments about their experiences throughout the discussions:

I share many of your thoughts about this experience and would go as far to say that I have felt quite deskilled by the experience: I REALLY had little idea of what I was doing most of the time. I think my skills - as they are - in the face to face are contingent on my sense of who the group is and I had none of this here. Even the names meant so little. When I tried to relate directly, I either reinforced dependence or counterdependence - tricky one this - or closed people down. I actually managed to shut someone out for over two weeks - or at least this is my fantasy.

Facilitator anxiety

The facilitators commented on anxieties they felt during the online course:

I don't know about all of you but I feel quite isolated out here and have real reservations about how 'we' are functioning as a group. Despite the contacts we made in week one, I still feel as if I am on my own out here . . .

Implications For Adult Education Practice

By exploring challenges, issues, and difficulties, this study helps to improve the teaching and facilitation skills of educators in cross-cultural online environments. This research expands the current literature about facilitating online with a cross-cultural group of students and supports existing literature on the responsibilities of the facilitator in an online environment. Furthermore, it sheds new light on the challenges specific to the facilitator in a cross-cultural online environment and provides potential facilitators with opportunity to consider difficulties and challenges before entering the online environment with culturally diverse students. Additionally, it suggests that problems and challenges of facilitating in an cross-cultural online environment go beyond linguistic misunderstandings, misunderstandings of cultural context cues or issues in differences in online participation.

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