There Is No "We" in Team: Learning to Learn Across Difference in Problem-based Teams

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Increased emphasis is being placed on working and learning through teams, especially online. While technical aspects of this process have largely been the focus of researchers and practitioners, the emotional dynamics of online teams has received considerably less attention. In this study of online, problem-based learning teams, membership evoked a powerful sense of ambivalence and emotion revolving around difference, authority, and intimacy. Learning to learn across difference involved a re-working of one's identity as a team member and learner.

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In one educational organization, members of a three-person team charged with developing a new curricular approach for their educational program were excited about the insightful and innovative ideas reflected in the proposal they had constructed. Eager to share their thinking with colleagues, a meeting was called of the larger group of six instructors to outline this new perspective. Shortly after they began to present these ideas, the room filled with tension and several of the other instructors began to aggressively challenge the ideas being presented. At first the team members attempted to defend their proposal, but as the others intensified their criticism, they backed away in resignation and defeat. The proposal was shelved without careful exploration or analysis by the larger group. The team members left the meeting emotionally upset, feeling personally attacked and with little interest in continuing the work.

This anecdotal story underscores the power of emotional dynamics that often permeate workplace teams and groups. Recent organizational literature has been drawing attention to the importance of emotional dynamics in the workplace and workplace learning (Cherniss & Goleman, 2001; Goleman, 1995, 1996; Hochschild, 1983). In a preliminary report of a study of incidents of problem-solving among front-line manufacturing workers, Brockman (2003) found that her study participants often described "problems" that involved relationships and communications with fellow workers, team members, supervisors, and managers. Expecting stories of technical difficulties that arose within the manufacturing processes, she instead heard a number of participants recall incidents that seem to revolve around interpersonal interactions more than they involved technical breakdowns. Their stories suggest that, within the manufacturing process, the technical challenges are often the easiest to resolve. But they are frequently complicated and even exacerbated by the complexity of the human relations issues in which they are embedded.

At the dawn of the twenty-first century, the experiences of these workers reflect a growing reality - life in organizations feels like "permanent white water" (Vaill, 1996), where change is the only constant. As a result, more emphasis is now placed on lifelong learning. Some scholars suggest we recognize the workplace as a primary location for adult learning and development (Welton, 1991), a notion reflected in the idea of the "educative workplace" (Dirkx, 1996). Specific methods used to realize this notion include the learning organization (Senge, 1990) learning communities (Stein & Imel, 2002), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), and action learning (York, O'Niel, & Marsick, 1999). In one form or another they all stress the importance of group inquiry and emphasize relationships and the development of interdependence in the workplace. Attention to these particular forms of learning in the workplace recognizes the inherently social, collaborative, and constructivist nature of learning (Steffe & Gale, 1995).

Underdeveloped in this view of workplace learning, however, is the role that emotional issues and dynamics play in the overall work and learning of the group or organization, particularly around issues of difference. Work on emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1995; 1998; Cherniss & Goleman, 2001) has helped increase attention to the importance of emotional dynamics within the workplace. This approach, however, individualizes emotions through processes of self-awareness and self-management, and suggests that emotions can be controlled and managed (Hochschild, 1983). Furthermore, this literature provides little explanation as to why emotions arise within

particular groups or interpersonal situations, why they are so often associated with the perception of difference, or what they might mean within the broader scope of human interactions. Furthermore, as organizations become increasingly global in their orientation, more of this work is being conducted with "virtual" teams that meet online and conduct their meetings through electronically-mediated communications.

When individuals come together to work as a team, a variety of differences which otherwise often remain implicit become explicit. How team members perceive and learn to work across these differences will significantly influence the quality and quantity of work produced by this team, as well as the overall quality of life within the team. As Sidorkin (1999) suggests, the difference among teams and individuals is "a central defining condition of human existence (p. 10). Because of the virtual nature of online teams, this problem of difference becomes even more complex.

Our interest in this paper is on this problem of difference in online team learning. In our study, we focused on developing a better understanding of how difference is manifest and managed by online teams, the emotional dynamics associated with its expression, and the various strategies that teams develop to address difference.

Theoretical Perspective

To help make sense of and better understand the problem of difference in teams and their struggles with learning to work across these differences, we drew from dialogical perspectives (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Sidorkin, 1999) and psychodynamic group theory (Smith & Berg, 1987). Based on the work of Bakhtin (1984) and Buber (1987), Sidorkin argues that difference is a "central, defining condition of human existence" (p. 10). It is in and through dialogue with others that we realize who we are, our identity as persons. Sidorkin suggests that "the very fact of human existence is contingent upon engagement in dialogical relations….we are truly human only when we are in a dialogical relation with another." (p. 11). Dialogue connotes "the capacity to deeply receive the other and the capacity to receive oneself; to allow the other a voice and to allow the self voice" (Watkins, 2000, p. 184). According to Sidorkin, "Dialogue is not an activity in a sense that it is not directed toward anything. Dialogue is an end itself, the very essence of human existence" (p. 14). Harris and Saedghi (1987) assert that " 'You' and 'I' are not distinct units but rather part/wholes in the process of creating who 'we' are." If a person is denied recognition as a member of a group, important consequences may result for that person's sense of identity.

The critical importance of dialogue to group process is reflected in the paradoxical theory of group life (Smith & Berg, 1987). Paradoxical theory helps us better understand "those forces that draw us into repeated oscillations between enchantment and despair over groups" (p. 4). Grounded in a psychodynamic view of human nature and object relations theory, this perspective is concerned with the emotional and psychological processes that exist relatively independent of the tasks that teams face. Group formation and development involves the paradoxical movements of the group taking in the individual member, and the individual member seeking to assert his or autonomy. The individual seeks to become a member but such membership represents a threat to his or her identity. To the extent members perceive this identity as less than fully actualized, development of the team suffers which, in turn, further constrains dialogue and relationships within the team. Life as a team member often has this "damned if you do and damned if you don't" feel to it. Membership simultaneously evokes fears and hopes among those who participate. According to Smith and Berg, development and change in small groups are characterized by this dialectical, paradoxical movement. But this sense of paradox is also a primary source of feeling stuck, of going nowhere, of spinning one's wheels. The way *through* the paradox is to honor the dialectic within the paradox, to stay in dialogue with the conflict, the team as a whole, and its individual members.

This study focused on the following questions: 1) How is difference within online problem-based learning teams manifest? 2) What are the emotional dynamics associated with the expression of these differences? and 3) What strategies do online teams adopt to manage these differences and their associated emotionalities?

Methods

In this study, we selected teams of learners participating in an online graduate course in a postsecondary educational leadership development program within a large, Midwestern research university. This setting was selected because the team membership remained stable over a 16 week period, allowing for clear expression of developmental movement and dynamics. Furthermore, a significant dimension of the teams' work involved collaborative study and decision by consensus. The course allowed for access to eight online teams participating in the same course, controlling for variability that might be associated with different tasks, content, or instructors. While ideally we advocate the study of work teams within their natural environments, numbers and problems of access often make research in these settings somewhat problematic. For this reason, we chose to focus on teams that were confronted

with real-world problems but in a "simulated" context. Because this course is offered for credit and is an integral part of their graduate program, there were aspects of this experience that felt very real to the participants.

The course was designed and implemented using a problem-based format (Bridges & Hallinger, 1995), in which small, heterogeneous teams work to understand and resolve highly ill-structured situations. Participants were purposively assigned by the instructor to teams of three to four learners and the teams stayed intact for the entire semester. Guided by the principles of consensus group work (Bruffee, 1999), these teams were required to collaboratively construct the meaning of the case, what research was relevant to the case, and an appropriate resolution to the perceived problems of the case. The problems were derived from real-world contexts of professional practice, including community college, continuing professional development, and business and industry. Members within a given team shared in the grade for the product, but also received credit and grades for other individual work in the class.

Twenty-five of the twenty-six enrolled learners agreed to participate, consisting of a mix of masters and doctoral level students. Of the study participants, 64% were European-American, 24% were people of color with American citizenship, 12% were International students, and 64% were women. A qualitative methodology informed by a phenomenological perspective was used to guide the overall design, data collection, and analysis. Data sources included a background questionnaire, in-depth participant interviews conducted near or after the conclusion of the course, debriefing papers for each problem written by individual team members, reflective journals maintained by each team member, and archives from team discussion boards and chat rooms. Interview transcripts were analyzed using constant comparative methods. Participants' papers and journals, as well as archival material were analyzed for evidence that were either positive or negative examples of themes derived from the interviews.

Findings

Viewed through the dialogical perspective and psychodynamic group theory, our findings illuminate the emotional complexity involved in fostering the educative workplace through collaborative teamwork. Because the nature of the differences reflected in the data and their associated emotional dynamics are intimately bound up with each other, we report the findings in a more narrative form, reflected in the notion of "lessons". These lessons suggest the struggle that participants experience in attempting to integrate the voice of the other with the voice of oneself. Learning to work across difference involves recognizing and giving voice to these differences. Giving voice to difference, however, reflects only part of the process. In working across difference, team members must be willing to allow one's sense of identity as a team member to be reworked and renegotiated through the process.

Lesson One – Ambivalence as Inherent to Learning in Teams

Perception of difference within teams creates a profound sense of ambivalence among its members. They want to honor difference but they also see it as an obstacle to achieving common goals. They both desire and fear participation in authentic dialogue. Participants in this study wanted to be able to express who they were as a team member, and to be able to listen to others. Ann explained that an affinity for language "allows [the group members] to assure each other that what one person is saying is being heard generally the same by the rest of the members of the group," creating a "confidence in exploring, challenging, looking for alternatives, [and] developing consensus."

In reflecting on their process, Ginger suggested, "Each of us comes from distinctly different backgrounds. Each of us saw the problems from a different angle. In the learning process, that helps a great deal. I appreciate diversity of minds. In the workplace, I have found it critical to have different perspectives on a given problem." India noted: "Different opinions are exciting because verbally the team members came from different places and they all agreed."

Reflecting the sentiment of many others, however, Sophia voiced her frustration associated with the presence of difference: "It's hard to see how things work together and don't work together, especially when we all have different agendas when we come to the table. How does a paper get written when each person disagrees?" India remarked, "We don't really write as a group. The group is so diverse that it can be quite challenging to get things done." In a sense, learners both desire to learn within a group and loathe the group process. This deep sense of ambivalence seems associated with the struggle for individual voice and authority within a growing sense of the group entity.

Lesson Two –Share Voice as "First Discourse"

Because of this profound sense of ambivalence, getting much beyond a shared sense of voice in task-oriented teams is exceedingly difficult to accomplish. Sidorkin (1999) refers to this sense of shared voice as "first discourse," providing "a common text, a shared experience…, a common set of references, a shared language" (p. 75). But in the development of authentic dialogue it is followed by "second discourse," a level of interaction in which "a word is half ours and half someone else's" (p. 77). For the most part the teams in this study did not engage one another in the deep, challenging conversations that characterize authentic dialogue or Sidorkin's notion of second discourse. According to Scarlett, everyone listens but "I don't think people are willing to challenge points of view."

This lack of challenge is prompted in part by a desire to include all voices, regardless of its perceived relevance to the team's work. Scarlett recalled a time when one of her team members' contributions to the final product did not seem to fit but she said, "One person can't decide that one piece doesn't work, because it is what they contributed. You just can't throw something out. I mean, you can't do it even though you know that it doesn't seem to connect with what the rest of the group has done….It doesn't seem to be fair. So we were left with just having to put it in." In a photographic journal entry, Anne portrays the process of putting together their team's product. Sheets of 8 ½ x 11 paper with print on them are cut to varying lengths and spread out over a five square foot area of the floor, representing contributions from different team members. Using color markers to code the various parts, the photo portrayed her attempt to assemble these parts into the team's final report.

Unwillingness to engage one another in authentic dialogue was fueled by the fear that this level of interaction risked raising personal and interpersonal issues that participants were clearly unwilling to engage. Scarlett observed, "Not very many people are comfortable with conflict. I think what happens quite a lot and it seemed to me in our small group was that if there was disagreement, then often times it was just avoided." This stance created a seemingly no-win situation, in which team members sought authentic dialogue but resisted the self-disclosure necessary for this form of dialogue to occur. Several members perceived their teams as dancing around key issues, rather than confronting them directly and authentically. Such perceptions prompted these members to psychologically withdraw from the teams, further contributing to dissatisfaction in the team and furthering more withdrawal. David, a White-American master's student, explained that the two female doctoral members of his team, an African-American and a White-American were constantly disagreeing with one another. He comments, "I just sat there and watched the two of them disagree…I did not want to take sides in a three person group."

Lesson Three – Developing Strategies to Address Emerging Differences

Teams must develop specific strategies to address the differences represented in the establishment of common text. Either they learn to work across these differences, engaging in the difficult but intrinsically meaningful processes of authentic dialogue, or they develop strategies to get around the need to confront and deal directly with their differences. How teams learn to manage their differences holds critical consequences for their future welfare and vitality. At the core of dialogical capacity and working across difference is the ability to allow the voice of the other while maintaining "one's own voice amidst the fray of relationship" (Watkins, 2000, p. 182). Learning to work across differences involves team members developing a reflexive stance toward the apparent conflict or paradox in which they feel themselves immersed (Smith & Berg, 1987). These members are able to step back from their identification with the conflict and recognize the various ways in which the conflict simultaneously evokes both their desire to engage and fear of what it may involve. In holding opposing truths in consciousness at the same time, they are often able to redefine the issues involved and move through the paradox to new levels of consciousness within the team.

Participants clearly identified and named important differences among their members. Many of these differences identified seemed emotionally-laden, reflecting conflict over participants' interests, values, or goals. Although they expressed a desire to honor and give voice to these differences, they were unable to effectively work across these differences to break through to a more authentic form of interaction and discourse. As with Autumn, they perceived themselves to be stuck, unable to move through or out of what seemed like a no-win situation: "I have begun to feel like a motorboat that is in gear but can't move forward across the lake very easily because there is this giant anchor there pulling me backwards. It just doesn't seem like we are picking up any momentum…I was most ticked this week about how little progress we have made."

Rather than learning to work across difference, participants developed strategies to get around the problem of difference, further increasing the difficulty of achieving authentic dialogue. One strategy was to psychologically withdraw, evident when members simply didn't care about the overall team product. They simply wanted it done and over with, an attitude which contributed to a sense of lifelessness in the team,. Annie commented: "We were just trying to get through the motions of it rather than the deeper learning that was supposed to come." This strategy often results in psychological death of the team, if not its literal dissolution. Other teams sought more authoritarian interventions to get them out of their sense of stuckness. In this strategy, members often invited or welcomed a team member or even an outside authority (e.g., a teacher) to step in and take charge, often telling them what needs to be done and relegating team members to a subservient role. Chris, a master's student noted how she and Ginger, a master's student, began to depend upon Nard, a doctoral student. "She took the bull by the horns and just went with it and we totally appreciated that…Nard always knew her…content…She's going for a Ph.D. and so she has been taking classes longer… that was really helpful… having another person in our team who could kind of make it flow for us."

Discussion

Fostering of the educative workplace, through the use of such approaches as the learning organization, action learning, learning communities and communities of practice, places the self in potential dialogical relationship with the "other." In so doing, we surface difference and create the need among the learning team to learn to work across these differences, "to differentiate and integrate the self's and the other's point of view" (Watkins, 2000, p. 180). These findings suggest the difficulty involved in creating conditions of authentic dialogue in learning teams and learning to work across difference. These difficulties derive from the very reasons that make dialogue so meaningful and important. The process is emotionally laden and intimately bound up with an evolving sense of self-other relationships within the team. It evokes powerful feelings of uncertainty, ambiguity, and ambivalence among team members, who seem to both desire and loath team membership. Despite their best intentions to honor difference and to hold these within a dialogical frame, team members seem vulnerable to paralyzing feelings of despair, alienation, or helplessness.

But such emotions are not negative in the sense of unwanted or undesirable. Although they may feel quite painful, they represent messengers from the team's depth (Dirkx, 1997), letting members know about aspects of its life unattended. They help us keep in mind the multiple and conflicting truths that make up any given social context. Such messengers remind us that conflict in team life is something to be lived and embraced, rather than something to be "resolved" through appeal to authorities external to the team, by withdrawing, or by "fixing" the problem through more effective communication skills. It is only through authentic dialogue with an "other" that we are able to full realize who we are as persons, our sense of identity within that particular social context. Yet, it is this very possibility of openly confronting and working on our sense of self that engenders fear within team members and makes such relationships and interactions so difficult. Learning to live amidst and within difference is to learn to be human (Sidorkin, 1999). To avoid difference or run from it is to ultimately run from the self. As Watkins (2000) suggests, "the dialogues of social interaction are both creative of the self and liberating of the self" (p.185). Engaging in an authentic process of creating who we are "is unfortunately a responsibility which many of us are unprepared to bear in times of interpersonal conflict" (Harris & Saedghi, 1987).

Conclusion

Difference gives voice to the fundamentally paradoxical, emotional nature of group life. To fully enter into dialogue with these paradoxes makes problematic one's sense of identity as a group member, creating ambivalence towards the group, others, and towards oneself. It is within this relationship of difference that team members are challenged to learn and to grow. It is through a recognition and appreciation of difference that members experience a sense of newness or novelty (Mahoney, 1991) and are encouraged towards change and development. This sense of newness, however, is only fully grasped when team members learn to hold and work through the tension of the opposites that characterize the sense of paradox in which they find themselves (Smith & Berg, 1987).

The difficulties experienced by the members of these online teams in learning to work across difference reflect the emotional dynamics encountered by the face-to-face curriculum team in the opening anecdotal story. While the virtual context adds levels of complexity not readily apparent in face-to-face contexts, the difficulty of constructively entering into and addressing the powerful emotionality associated with the teams' processes seems equally apparent in either context. Effective team processes are intimately bound up with self processes. To be truly effective and to engage in second level discourse, individual members need to, paradoxically, be willing and able to let go of preconceived notions of their own sense of identity in order to truly find their individual identity as a group member. This claim holds profound implications for organizations as they seek to construct the educative workplace. The face-to-face and online teams that constitute the contexts for organizational learning will only thrive in environments that fully support authentic engagement of both one's self and the other. Anything else, as the saying goes, seems like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

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