Social Categorization: In-Groups and Out-Groups

As noted, team members in computer-supported collaborative learning environments have a tendency to automatically assume that distant-site team members are social loafers. They can also make many other unpleasant assumptions about their distant-site team members. Online collaborative teams seem to automatically divide themselves into "us versus them" (e.g., Harasty, 1997; Stephan, 1985) resulting in stereotyping and potential bias. Sometimes the "us versus them" bias involves one site pitted against another. In other cases, some team members bond, while others do not, and those that bond become the "us," whereas those who do not become the "them."

This tendency is explained in social psychological terms through the use of in-groups and out-groups. An in-group is a group to whom you, as a person, belong, and anyone else who is perceived as belonging to that group. In-group members have positive views of each other, and give each member preferential treatment. An out-group consists of anyone who does not belong to your group. Out-groups are viewed more negatively, and receive inferior treatment in comparison to that of in-group members. In-group members are perceived as being heterogeneous, and as having positive qualities, referred to as in-group differentiation (e.g., Lambert, 1995; Linville & Fischer, 1993). Out-group members are perceived as being "all the same," homogeneous, and as having more negative qualities. This is referred to as the homogeneity bias (e.g., Linville, Fischer, & Salovey, 1989). These concepts are used to explain hostility between social groups (e.g., Republicans versus Democrats, gays versus straights, whites versus blacks). Relatedly, this bias creates problems with teams becoming cohesive across distant sites, as a result of team members perceiving students from their site (or those they bonded with) as "our team," and automatically seeing students from the distant site (or those they have not bonded with) as not part of "our team." In CORAL, for example, one site is located in a rural area, and the other is located in a suburban east coast area. We often find that students from the rural area view the students at the east coast area as rude and pushy, whereas the east coast students view the rural area students as slackers because they are slower-moving. Again, however, there are methods to reduce this social categorization and associated hostilities (e.g., Gaertner, Mann, Murrell, & Dovidio, 1989).

Recommendations

Increase intergroup contact. One proven method for reducing social categorization is to increase intergroup contact, referred to as the contact hypothesis (e.g., Pettigrew, 1997). It is vital that all team members communicate extensively, in order to reduce cross-site conflict and stereotyping. Perkins and Giordano (2004), as well as many others (e.g., Birenbaum, 2004; Scheer et al., 2004), also note the importance of encouraging communication, especially in distance learning. Extensive communication permits team members to see similarities with others, fostering both synchronous and asynchronous communication with cross-site team members, hence reducing homogeneity bias. In CORAL, for example, we encourage teams to meet in chat rooms once or twice a week, in addition to meeting via video conference during class time, and utilizing discussion boards for asynchronous communication. It should be noted, however, that in order for increased intergroup contact to have the desired effect, the overall interactions must be neutral to positive. If the majority of cross-site interactions are unpleasant and negative, the hostility between groups will remain or increase.

Introduce superordinate goals. A second method for reducing social categorization is the introduction of superordinate goals (Sherif, 1958). As mentioned in the previous sections, the introduction of a task that can only be met through the efforts of all team members can significantly reduce the hostility between in-groups and out-groups, and increase team cohesion. By working together, team members begin to know each other as unique individuals, thereby eliminating some of the bias and hostility that is often found in multiple-site learning communities.

Recategorization. Another consideration for cross-site in-groups and out-groups is recategorization (e.g., Gaertner et al., 1989). Recategorization involves changing the boundaries of the in-group and out-group. While some teams cannot overcome the initial cross-site "us versus them" division, most teams can. But, when teams are able to overcome initial social categorization, other types of in-groups and out-groups can emerge. For example, at the beginning of the semester, we find cross-site social categorization to be very common, but as the semester progresses, team members are able to make connections with cross-site team members, who then become part of the in-group. Occasionally, the entire team becomes one in-group, a very favorable occurrence for collaborative learning. But, when only some team members bond across sites, the complexion of the team takes on a different

look. In-groups emerge and consist of both same-site and cross-site team members, and the same for out-groups. We find that students who remain in the out-group tend to have work habits that are not conducive to team efforts and do not feel favorable to working as a team member. They are resistant to team work and try to give the impression that they are members of the team, but it is only an attempt to please authority figures (e.g., professors). They tend to be social loafers, or communicate less with the team, or are unpleasant to work with, regardless of which site they are located. Although teams can continue to work somewhat effectively with minimal contribution from these out-group members, it is obviously to the teams' benefit to be inclusive. Thus, we encourage groups of students to form whole teams that consist of all team members, but if they cannot—say, for personality conflict reasons—we instruct teams to continue to give those out-group members opportunities to work and become part of the in-group. However, teams are also coached to have a back-up plan if the work of the out-group member is not up to par with other team members, or not completed at all.

If recategorization does not occur naturally within the cross-site team, then we encourage it by asking students to work in pairs across two sites on individual sections of assignments. This allows cross-site team members to get to know each other as individuals, note their strengths, and see them complete work and convey this information to other team members at their site. In other cases where collaborative classes are purely Web-based and students bond over technology-assisted communication, asking in-group students to pair with out-group students should also have the desired effect.

Cognitive Distortions

We've mentioned that students often dislike group work because the learner had earlier negative group experiences where they felt responsible for completing all—or most—of the assignment adequately, and without the aid of group members. In some cases, team members believe that others will complete the assignment, and as a result, students fail to contribute. Therefore, other team members have to assume responsibility, and do complete the assignment alone. In other cases, students behave this way due to a lack of confidence in fellow classmates' ability to complete assignments to their standards. They believe that their academic skills are superior to those of

their teammates, and that their teammates' quality of work will negatively affect their grade (e.g., Felder & Brent, 1994; NISE, 1997). In this case, other team members are willing to contribute to the completion of the assignment, but are not allowed to do so.

This is an example of a cognitive distortion called the self-serving bias; in other words, the tendency to attribute positive outcomes to internal causes, and negative outcomes to external causes (e.g., Brown & Rogers, 1991; Miller & Ross, 1975). Relatedly, the ultimate attribution error is a tendency to make more flattering attributions about members of one's own group than about members of another group (Hewstone, Bond, & Wan, 1983). These attributions are detrimental to the formation of a collaborative learning community, and reflective of in-group/out-group biases. As a result, these types of individuals often think the team succeeded only because of their efforts, or their in-group's efforts, in completing a task. These individuals often attribute negative outcomes to out-group members. This perception, while occasionally true, is more often a cognitive distortion, an illusion manifested by these individuals, and calling attention to this concept may reduce some of the ill will that can develop in early stages of collaborative learning.

Relatedly, this type of cognitive distortion is especially common in certain high-achieving students. While some excellent students are quite adept at online collaboration, others are painfully unprepared for the experience. They often feel as though they are the only team members capable of completing adequate work, and are often dissatisfied with the work others produce. They therefore complete whole assignments alone, but then complain that they have completed all the work, and that no other team members are working. Other team members, in turn, can feel insulted by this lack of trust in their abilities, along with being referred to as social loafers by individuals who consider themselves better-quality students. In reality, this is not effective learning behavior for the individual, nor for their team. While this sense of responsibility and independence has been rewarded in other educational settings, it is contradictory to the purpose of online learning communities, and generally to collaborative learning.

Recommendations

Teach trust and mentoring. Because the reward structure in computer-supported collaborative learning environments is so different than that in traditional learning settings, these high-achieving students can feel frustrated and

betrayed. What they are lacking is a sense of trust in working with others. Thus, taking time to help them trust their teammates is usually productive. For example, in CORAL, we often ask these types of students to take a chance, reduce their workload, and give other team members an opportunity to contribute. If they can force themselves to back off, they are often pleasantly surprised by the amount—and quality—of work their teammates can contribute. In addition, they need to be shown that it is their responsibility to help their teammates learn course material. Students such as these must be taught to be less independent and more concerned about the well-being of their team members instead of their own individual sense of well-being. Furthermore, they need to realize how their behavior is actually hindering team development and the learning of other team members.

Intellectualize. It is helpful, with this type of student, to intellectualize these experiences by labeling them as the self-serving bias or the ultimate attribution error, as a strategy to reduce feelings of discomfort that can be associated when challenging the appropriateness of their behavior. In effect, it is suggested that teams engage in metacognition (i.e., observe their own behaviors, apply labels to those behaviors, and determine whether they are appropriate for team development). If the behaviors are not helpful to team development, then their task is to develop solutions for those inappropriate behaviors. Not only do these metacognitive exercises help students to intellectualize and understand unpleasant online experiences, but they also contribute to developing a life-long learning process (Birenbaum, 2004; Kitsantas & Dabbagh, 2004).

Stages of Group Development

Students (and faculty) are sometimes reluctant to utilize collaborative learning, because they are uncomfortable with, and unprepared for, team conflict and conflict resolution (e.g., Felder & Brent, 1994). However, it is also useful to understand that long-term groups tend to pass through a number of stages, one of which is characterized by disagreement, ranging from mild to more extensive.

Tuckman and Jensen (1977) suggested that groups go through five stages of development, from their inception through their adjournment: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. Each has unique charac-