This qualitative cross-case study explored the experiences that learners describe within online collaborative groups. The study context was a fully online graduate course on adult learning. The findings suggest that the small online groups demonstrated dynamics and process that are characteristic of individual growth and development and group individuation, which mirror the experiences of face-to-face groups. The results of these two developmental processes led to unsafe learning spaces and opportunities for group members to rework their sense of identity as learners and group members. Implications are presented for the use of these kinds of groups in online educational settings.

**Keywords:** collaborative group; consensus; group-as-a-whole; group transformation; self-authorship; online learning; qualitative cross-case analysis

Collaborative group work is a common teaching approach for many adult educators. Theorists (see, e.g., Bruffee, 1999) cite many advantages of collaborative groups. These include (a) increased learner motivation, (b) opportunities for adult learners to develop critical and problem-solving skills, and (c) a potential social atmosphere where all learners are afforded an opportunity to share, consider, challenge one another’s ideas, and coconstruct new knowledge (Bruffee, 1999).

Attainment of these skills relies upon a paradigmatic shift in learners’ beliefs about teaching and learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995). The old paradigm focuses on adult educators who transmit knowledge to learners. In the new paradigm, learners confront ill-structured problems (Jonassen, 2000) that are contextualized (represent real-world practice) and ambiguous (multiple embedded issues and solutions). The theoretical benefits of collaborative groups seem ideal for adult learning contexts; the current research supports their usefulness (Bruffee, 1999).

Research on collaborative groups, however, provides little attention to the emotional nature of the paradigmatic shift and the underlying paradoxical tensions inherent in all group work. The paradoxical tensions exist between the individual
and the group (K. Smith & Berg, 1987) developmental processes. Within the literature, this neglect is especially prevalent about online collaborative groups. To this end, this article seeks to better understand the experiences that adult learners describe within online collaborative groups.

The central argument is that as learners confront the need to make the paradigmatic shift within their online collaborative groups, they are challenged by (a) the paradoxical tension generated by their desire to be a part of the group and their fear of being rejected by the group (K. Smith & Berg, 1987) and (b) the difficulties associated with communicating online without the normal physical cues (McConnell, 2000). To help illuminate this argument, some definitions are needed.

**Definitions**

Collaborative groups are small, interdependent, and heterogeneous groups that coconstruct knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978) through the resolution of ill-structured problems (Jonassen, 2000) to achieve consensus and shared classroom authority (Bruffee, 1999). Examples of these kinds of groups include problem-based learning (PBL; Barrows, 1994; Boud & Feletti, 1991) and case-based learning (Christensen & Hansen, 1986), in which the teacher serves as the facilitator and the small groups learn the content through problem exploration.

*Consensus* results in a mutual agreement that all group members support after all of them feel that they have had an opportunity to express their opinions and that they have been listened to by the group (Ball Foundation, 2002). It does not mean that everyone agrees. The “group-as-a-whole” (Bennis & Shepard, 1956) is a way to conceptualize the collaborative group as an entity that grows and develops much like the individual group members.

**BACKGROUND**

Proponents of online learning (see, e.g., Harasim, 1987) cite several advantages of the online environment that makes it ideal for collaborative groups. The ongoing nature of asynchronous group meetings negates the need to coordinate schedules to meet with group members (McConnell, 2000). Moreover, these educators claim that contextualized content and active learning strategies within collaborative learning approaches result in increased learner motivation, persistence, and learning outcomes.

A review of the literature, however, revealed that learners face communication, technical, and sociocultural challenges in their collaborative groups. The limited nonverbal communication cues and communication spontaneity serve to increase the time needed to make decisions (McConnell, 2000; Straus & McGrath, 1994) and reach consensus (Straus & McGrath, 1994).

Males, learners with ready access to the Internet, learners who speak the native language, and those with greater subject matter expertise dominate the conversa-
tion and the direction of the collaborative group (Berdal & Craig, 1996; Sage, 2000). Lauzon (2000) cautions that consensus types of online collaborative learning could reinforce the dominant ideology when minority group members are not allowed full participation within the discussion and decision-making processes. The technical, communication, and sociocultural challenges may add to participants’ ambivalence and uncertainty about the value of learning in collaborative groups (Ragoonaden & Bordeleau, 2000).

Bernard, Beatriz, and St. Piere (2000) and Laurillard (2002) assert that educators based their recommendations regarding the use of online collaborative learning strategies on theoretical and speculative assumptions about the value of collaboration for online learners rather than empirical evidence. Understanding learner experiences in these collaborative groups is, therefore, critical.

The changing nature of our global society makes it necessary to learn to live, work, and interact with people who are both different from us (Merriam & Cafferella, 1999) and who live at a distance. Moreover, the probability that adult learners will engage in consensus collaborative efforts may increase as our society becomes more global. Online distance education programs are growing rapidly to attract many of the more than 70 million adult learners (Web-Based Commission, 2000), based on convenience and flexibility (Schrum, 1998) as well as a more contextual curriculum. In addition, the use of virtual teams within the workplace is growing at a remarkable rate (de Lisser, 1999). A review of collaborative groups (Bruffee, 1999) and group dynamics (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Gibbard, 1974; Hartman & Gibbard, 1974; Wells, 1990; Winters, 1974) helps to illuminate the issues.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS**

**Collaborative Groups**

According to Bruffee (1999), the purpose of collaborative groups is to achieve consensus and shared classroom authority. Newcomb (1962) maintains that the consensus-building process places knowledge construction within the small groups, among peers, rather than between the learners and the teacher. Bringing the group members’ different points of view together into a consensus or synthesis of knowledge involves considerable group discussion.

Group discussions should encourage individuals to coordinate different points of view, which in turn enhances reasoning and higher order thinking skills that promote shared knowledge construction (McKnight, 2000). During the consensus process, learners are more likely to submit their previous unshared beliefs and opinions to the group for consideration. The consensus process, therefore, provides space for meaning making (Bruffee, 1999) and self-reflection (Schön, 1990). Through iterative cycles of discussion and reflection (Schön, 1990), learners integrate their individual perspectives with relevant theory and research to promote changes in beliefs and to construct knowledge.
Yet, learners in online collaborative groups may fail to attain problem-solving skills (Oliver & Omari, 2001). Furthermore, the challenges learners face with online collaborative groups may reinforce the learners' traditional beliefs rather than shift their thinking to the new paradigm (Clarebout & Elsen, 2001). Online collaborative group members are further challenged by the previous educational socialization that promotes distrust and competition among learners and reliance upon the teacher for knowledge that learners bring into the online environment (McConnell, 2002).

Although the above challenges provide an explanation for many of the issues online collaborative group members face, they minimize the ways in which the emotional issues may mediate learning within these contexts. An examination of the group dynamics process can further clarify the issues the learners may face as they work within online collaborative groups.

**Group Dynamics**

There is scant research to enable an understanding of the group dynamics within online collaborative groups. This section, therefore, relies heavily on the face-to-face literature. Group dynamics theorists (see, e.g., Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Bion, 1961; Gibbard, 1974; K. Smith & Berg, 1987) maintain that the central issue for individuals when they join a group is the unconscious tension generated by the conflicting fears of de-individualization (the learner's identity is obliterated or totally consumed into the group identity) at one extreme and of estrangement from the group at the other extreme. Unger (1984) explains that all humans crave the possibility for self-expression that they gain in association with one another. Yet, the work required to reach consensus threatens individual voice within a group voice (Dirkx & Smith, 2004; R. Smith, 2003). This tension is extremely emotionally laden, usually unconscious, and creates strong, unbearable love/hate feelings toward the group situation (Dirkx & Smith, 2004; Wells, 1995). Group members, therefore, tend to psychologically or socially withdraw from the group to eliminate the tension.

Yet, to achieve individuation (a personal and distinct identity within the group), group members must release aspects of their individuality (subjectivity) to connect (intersubjectivity) with one another to share and empathize with one another's common fears (K. Smith & Berg, 1987) of estrangement or obliteration. Moving from subjectivity to intersubjectivity within online groups is inhibited by the learners' inability or unwillingness to release the tight hold on their previous schooling socialization (competitiveness and mistrust) with its embedded subjective and individualistic understandings of teaching and learning (Dirkx & Smith, 2004). The collaborative group work runs the risk of minimizing or even ignoring individual identity or subjectivity (Dirkx & Smith, 2004). A continued collegiality also threatens learners' abilities to maintain their sense of individual voice within the collaborative group. The added stress of consensus, the dynamics of group development,
and the communication challenges within the online environment serve to add to
the participants' ambivalence about online group work (Dirkx & Smith, 2004;

Group members also make quick judgments about their fellow group members’
ability to contribute to the group in ways that mirror societal hierarchical structures
(Cheng, Chae, & Gunn, 1998; Wells, 1990; Wheelan, 1994; Winter, 1974). Wheelan
(1994) contends that during early group developmental stages, group members
unconsciously assign roles based on the limited information they have about one
another. Once the roles are assigned, it is difficult to change them because the group
is unaware that it assigned the roles. Online groups remained in the first stage of
group development longer than face-to-face groups (McConnell, 2002, Trujillo,
1997). In extrapolation, the online group members may remain locked into roles
that mirror societal hierarchical structures.

Summary

Collaborative group work involves considerable interaction and discussion
among group members to more fully enter into the lives of one another, to actively
listen, be listened to, and reach consensus (Dirkx & Smith, 2004; R. Smith & Dirkx,
2003). When learners enter more fully into the lives of fellow group members, they
risk being engulfed or estranged from one another because of the inherently
psychodynamic small-group work. Although current research efforts on collabora-
tive groups provide an understanding of technical, communication, and socio-
cultural challenges, they provide little assistance to elucidate tensions between the
individual and the group. Relatively little is known about the psychodynamic ten-
sions within these collaborative groups, how learners work through their problems,
or how learners negotiate their differences.

This study, therefore, seeks to better understand the experiences that adult learn-
ers describe within online collaborative groups. The following questions guide this
inquiry: How do learners in online collaborative groups describe their experiences?
What, if any, issues do the learners describe? How do learners negotiate the issues
that they face?

METHOD

The study utilized a qualitative design with a cross-case study approach
(Merriam, 1998).

Study Context

The context of this study was a 16-week online course (no face-to-face class
meetings) on adult learning. The instructor, a European American professor, has a
strong background in group dynamics and experience-based learning. Neverthe-
less, this was his first experience with online and PBL.

The course format was a PBL strategy (Barrows, 1994; Boud & Feletti, 1991), a
process of learning course content through ill-structured (Jonassen, 2000) problem
exploration (Barrows, 1994) without traditional instruction. The instructor created
three ill-structured problems, which closely resembled situations the learners will
most likely encounter in their professional practices.

The first 2 weeks served as an orientation to the online environment, to the other
learners in the class, and to provide background information and activities on
collaborative learning, small-group work, consensus, and PBL. The instructor
assigned the learners to eight groups of three or four learners to more easily accom-
modate the use of chat rooms. The collaborative groups were provided a week to
familiarize themselves with one another, develop ground rules, and to select roles
(such as facilitator, recorder, etc.). The groups stayed intact for the entire semester.

Researcher Role

The researcher, an African American female, served as a graduate assistant
(GA) to the instructor for the course. As a GA, she was a member of the course
development team to provide structure for the orientation phase of the course. Dur-
ing the course, the researcher limited her involvement with the learners to technical
problem resolution and observing the class in the chat rooms and discussion
boards. Her prior experience with small groups includes course work on small-
group dynamics, the use of small groups in her teaching, and membership in small
groups during her graduate programs.

Data Sources

A triangulation approach (Flick, 1998) to data collection was employed. The
data collection sources included a background questionnaire, learner interviews,
instructor interviews, debriefing papers, reflection journals, and the archived
transcripts.

The background questionnaire contained the participant’s name, gender, age,
race/ethnicity, education, work experience, academic interests, prior computer
experience, online course history, computer access, and additional computer-
related questions. Twenty-two of the 25 participants were interviewed. Interviews
were semistructured and in depth, lasting approximately 45 minutes to 2 hours. All
but one of the interviews was tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. One partici-
pant declined audiotaping because voice recordings are prohibited in her culture.
The major stimulus questions within the interview protocol included, “Tell me
what stands out for you as a learner in this course.” When participants began dis-
cussing their collaborative group in this class, additional questions were asked,
such as “Describe your group” and “Describe how your group members communi-
cate with each other.” Informal conversations occurred with the instructor throughout the semester.

The debriefing papers were individual efforts that reflected the group debriefing processes. After the problem resolution, the collaborative groups reflected (debriefed) regarding their group and learning processes (Barrows, 1994). The reflective journals included weekly entries throughout the course. The transcripts were archived records from the discussion boards (entire class and individual groups) and the chat session (entire class and individual groups).

The Participants

The 25 graduate adult participants include 4 African American females (1 doctoral, 3 master’s-level students); 1 African American male (master’s); 1 international female (master’s); 1 international male (master’s); 1 Hispanic female (doctoral); 1 permanent resident female (master’s); 9 European American females (4 doctoral, 5 master’s); and 8 European American males (3 doctoral, 5 master’s). Their ages range from 23 to 55 years; 11 participants are in their 20s, 9 in their 30s, 4 in their 40s and 1 in her 50s. This course represented the first online class for 75% of the learners.

Limitations

This study is limited by the methodology, the course design, and the researcher’s role in the course. This study focused on eight groups in a single online course. The findings from this study, therefore, have limited generalizability. The course in this study was redesigned and taught online for the first time. Thus, the newness of the experience may have influenced both the instructor and participant experiences (Phipps & Merisotis, 1999). Although the researcher limited her role to helping learners with computer-related difficulties, it is possible that the learners viewed her as one of the instructors.

Data Analysis

The data analysis proceeded through a constant comparative approach (Cresswell, 1998). The learner interviews served as the primary data source. They were edited to produce a narrative of each participant by removing the researcher’s voice and sentence breaks such as “uh,” “you know,” and so forth. Appropriate information from the questionnaires (demographics, online course experience, and computer efficiency), debriefing papers (information regarding group processes and text content understanding), and all information from the reflective journals were added to the interview narratives. The archived records were used to better understand early learner reactions to the course, group communication, and group decisions. The narratives were then subjected to an iterative analysis process until
no additional themes were uncovered. The individual narratives for each of the groups were compared to the other members within the group to identify common themes among the group members in each group. The themes from each group were then compared to the other groups to frame the data analysis.

FINDINGS

The participants’ stories reflected periods of the perceived benefits of working with diverse group members punctuated with stories about the challenges with the process, then periods of positive comment about working in their groups. These fluctuating emotional cycles reflected iterative patterns.

Moments of positive comments about the group and its diverse group members occurred during the initial discussion of the problems and at the beginnings of the problem-solving process. Marcella noted, “It is good to hear diverse perspectives.”

Emotional challenges occurred when the groups first formed and when the participants began to narrow their focus to reach consensus regarding group decisions. Janis commented,

It’s like we have a problem that’s sitting right before us and we all had the same information. It was just a matter of us communicating with one another and putting together and researching the pieces to answer a question. You know it sounds easy, but it’s hard because you have to move through so many different phases of communication. Getting to know each other’s backgrounds, stress, and weaknesses is important in order to move forward and answer the questions.

The periods of emotional challenges were followed by more positive comments after the product was complete and the groups began to reflect upon the process. John commented,

I am starting to feel much more comfortable with the class. I am lucky to be on the team that I am. I feel the rest of the work we have to do on problems two and three will go smoothly.

Yet, when the groups proceeded through the next two problems they described the same iterative process. Ann noted, “We were never able to learn from our mistakes.”

Their attempts to understand and work with the differences among them surfaced emotional insecurities around their needs as learners and individuals. Balancing both the needs of the group and the individual was complex and emotionally laden. India astutely inquired, “Can you be an individual in a collaborative setting? That is the tension!”

The following sections provide a brief description of three themes derived from the participants’ descriptions of their experiences working across difference: the
early expectations, the cyclical movement, and consequences of the cyclical movement.

Early Expectations

After the orientation period, the instructor notified the participants of their group assignments. The notification generated bittersweet memories of past small-group experiences, which left the group members ambivalent about working with their collaborative groups. Collectively, the differences included sociocultural differences such as age, race, gender, and ethnicity, as well as work-related experiences, ideologies, and educational differences such as academic standing (doctoral, master's), disciplinary background, learning styles, types of degrees earned, and study habits. On one hand, the participants named many benefits derived from their group members. Nickie commented, “working in a group prepared us for future careers where working in a group is very vital.” On the other hand, participants remembered horror stories of uneven participation among group members with different study habits. Nard explained her previous experiences with small groups: “I have very high expectations of myself and therefore of others. And when I sense that others aren’t working as hard or in a focused manner . . . I get frustrated.” In spite of their ambivalence, the participants entered their groups with hopes that this time things would be okay. Ginger commented, “I’m not sure how this is all going to work via e-mail and chat room. Group work is difficult at best in person. I guess I’ll see.”

The Cyclical Movement

The cyclical movement reflects descriptions of the learners’ back-and-forth and iterative movement from a desire to connect with the diverse group members because of the perceived benefits and a pulling away from the group to avoid a perceived threat to their sense of individual identity. When the participants noted the benefits of working with diverse group members, they expressed desires to connect with the group. Tatiana explained why it was good to work with diverse perspectives: “Others in my group saw problem areas/issues in the problem that I hadn’t even thought of.”

Nevertheless, participants feared that efforts to fully connect with the group would obliterate their individuality. The concept of individuality seemed tightly bound with a sense of voice. It was as though a loss of voice was equal to a loss of individuality. Thus, some felt it important to have all voices literally represented in the group’s report. Chris pointed out that when she was the facilitator, she would make sure the group product included “everybody else’s information” and that nothing “was missing.”

The tension around the need to be both an individual and a group member became so severe that Lisa noted, “It’s hell!” India protested rather bluntly, “I don’t
want a group voice. I don't think group voice. As so it antagonizes me to the point that I don't want to do it [collaborate]."

Rather than face their fears, the group members fled psychologically and socially from the collaborative groups by adopting several coping strategies such as limiting opportunities for discussion, creating surrogate teachers (substitutes who acted like traditional teachers), engaging in flights of fantasy (wishful thinking such as "if only" we could have chosen our own group members), and not contacting the group for weeks at a time. For example, one group limited opportunities for group discussion by dividing up and completing the tasks independently and engaging in discussion only when it was time to write the paper. Marie concluded, "I don't think we actually did what the professor was expecting [collaboration] . . . It seems that there is nothing really to talk about online with all of the class and my group."

In addition, the groups implicitly created surrogate or substitute teacher roles, typically played by older members. These older group members assumed roles that are traditionally associated with the instructor, such as leadership and instruction, and thus allowed the members to avoid the need to make decisions in the midst of competing voices and confusion about group direction. For example, John described his older group member’s abilities:

She was the one that kind of helped us tie things together . . . If we weren’t sure what area we wanted to do [assignment regarding the task], she would break it down and say well, you know this is an interesting area to you and then we would kind of go from there.

Nevertheless, the group members began to miss the group and the benefits they could derive from their differences. Anne explained her sense of isolation from the group and tried to connect back with the class through classwide chats: "I feel more like a solitary learner, hence I like to sit in on chats, but not necessarily participate in them." She and others began to therefore draw closer to the class than their groups. Moving back to the group, however, generated the same feelings that caused them to flee, such as the fear of losing their voice and the need to reach consensus to get the work done.

The back-and-forth movement toward the group and away from the group continued in an iterative fashion each time the group needed to achieve consensus throughout each problem-solving process—during the problem identification, the action plan, and when it was time to write the paper. Ann explained their tension regarding their action plans. "The different levels of experience working with groups and diverse [group members] made it more challenging for some in the group to identify strategies that would be both practical to adapt and supportive of the theoretical background." The overwhelming feelings of frustration and fear caused the group members to flee the group and return again when they sensed isolation.
The process ends with the participants moving closer to the group again after submitting their group product and engaging in group reflections. As the group members drew closer to the group again, however, they described the same joys and frustrations with the diverse membership in their groups that generated the back-and-forth movement within the previous problems. Sophia noted, “We always seemed to hit this wall with each problem.” Hitting the wall seems to represent the need to face their fears, flee the group, or return to the group, thus fueling the cyclical, iterative nature of the movement for each of the three problems.

The Consequences of Their Cyclical Movement

The collaborative group created a space for the participants to find their voice as newly authorized group members. Janis noted, “There is more opportunities for your voice to be heard, for you to be empowered even, [and] to feel as if you have some influence on the direction that the group goes in.” The same space, however, created at least two other consequences for the participants: Certain members were deauthorized (provided less legitimacy) and a number of group members began to rethink their sense of identity as learners and group members.

Deauthorized members. In their attempts to “get the work done,” the groups often divided up tasks based on their perceptions of their fellow group members’ abilities. For example, the groups assigned minimal responsibilities to their non-native-English-speaking members because they felt these learners had faced unusual challenges of adapting to the United States and completing their studies. These efforts, although well intentioned, negatively influenced the non-native-English-speaking learners’ experiences. As a result, Xavier explained, “I did not feel comfortable, because my goals were to be as productive as they were.” Regarding his increasingly unequal participation, Xavier commented, “I was able to learn a little bit less that I was able to learn in the first problem.”

Another coping strategy included narrowly defining acceptable group contributions. In one of the groups, the two European American group members had education backgrounds and felt that group contributions should consist of lots of theory. Janis, the only African American group member, had a business background and tended to offer opinions that reflected a practical perspective on the problem. Janis described how her contributions were deauthorized: “I just felt when we were chatting and I would express my feelings on something or the way I would see something, it would just be seriously like critically questioned.”

Reworked sense of identity. A few participants described changes in their perceptions of themselves as learners and group members. They began to renegotiate their individualized learning preferences and themselves as learners and group members. Autumn, a surrogate and dominant member of her group, described changes in her thinking about group membership: “I was much like the taskmaster.
I became concerned that maybe I was stifling the participation of the other two in this problem.” Sophia described changes in the way she thought about learning. She explained, “I think I often expect others to do [the] convincing and I do that myself as a good listener, but now I’m not so sure.” Moreover, she exclaimed, “This assumption of mine has been challenged, and I feel myself changing in group settings.”

**DISCUSSION**

The findings indicate that the participants were able to learn the content and begin to reconsider the old paradigm—teacher as expert. Measurements of the level of group development or cohesiveness and the extent to which the groups learned the course content are beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, the findings demonstrate that a number of the participants were able to begin to rethink their role as learners and that each collaborative group was able to apply the course content to the problem exploration process. To this end, the participants met the course expectations. Bruffee (1999) explains that the collaborative groups serve two main functions, to coconstruct knowledge and to share classroom authority.

The fear of losing their individual identity was one of the main issues revealed in the participants’ stories. Their online collaborative group experiences demonstrate dynamics and processes that are characteristics of both individual development and group development that mirror face-to-face collaborative groups.

This fear manifested itself in an iterative cycle of ambivalence toward working within these groups. Although there are many theoretical implications, this work will focus on two developmental theories as lenses to understand the participants’ experiences: constructive developmental learning (Kegan, 1982, 1994) and group transformation or individuation (Gibbard, 1974; Hartman & Gibbard, 1974).

**Constructive Developmental Theory**

Constructive developmental theory (Kegan, 1982, 1994) helps to explain that the participants faced the need to change their meaning-making system. In Kegan’s words, the participants were experiencing an “evolutionary truce,” the emotional distance and disequilibrium between what they were experiencing—working as both teachers and learners—and what they currently believe—that teachers are the experts. This imbalance between current thinking and their work within the collaborative group caused them to begin a shift in their thinking (meaning-making structures), and thus a developmental movement. These developmental moves are characterized by alternating and iterative pendulum swings between the need to connect to others and the need to separate. In a discussion of Kegan’s (1982) work, Bee (1992) suggests the movement is more “like that of a spiral in which each shift to the other side of the polarity is at a more integrated level than the one before” (p. 323). Theoretically, the participants should eventually change their meaning system or
way of thinking to accommodate the paradigm shift required to work in the learner-centered environment.

There are many studies that examine online collaborative groups, yet most of these types of studies fail to focus on paradigmatic shifts. For example, Tan (2003) noted that many of his online PBL group members described their frustration with learning without traditional instruction, but the study failed to situate the frustration within adult development literature. McConnell’s (2002) study of online PBL groups, however, examined the identity change issues his participants described regarding the need to learn without traditional instruction. He concluded that these changes are a natural part of forming communities of practice. The findings presented here extend McConnell’s work to show that these identity issues may also reflect characteristics of constructive developmental theory.

**Group Dynamics Theory**

Juxtaposed with the individual developmental change and growth process, the participants’ stories demonstrated dynamics and processes that are characteristic of group individuation (Hartman & Gibbard, 1974). Group individuation is the process by which the group develops a mature and separate entity (the group as a whole) to carry out the assigned work task. Using Hartman and Gibbard’s work, the iterative cycle is actually a back-and-forth movement between the boundaries of the individual and the group. The movement is marked by alternating swings between the fears of alienation (complete estrangement from the group) and fusion (complete obliteration into the group). Group development as represented by the individuation process might be conceptualized as a pendulum that swings back and forth between these two extremes. Within this space, the group as a whole (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Wells, 1995) compels the group members to work through their fears so that the group can expand its boundaries and the group members can move on to more productive work. Yet, the group members are not only resistant to work through their fears but may in fact physically and/or psychologically withdraw due to the extreme nature of the tension. According to Gibbard (1974), when the group as a whole seeks to stretch its boundaries, the group members withdraw to seek independence. Yet, by seeking independence they risk being estranged from the group, so they move back toward the group. The back-and-forth movement creates opportunities for the group as a whole to grow as the group members face their fears and begin to work together.

The groups in this study adopted several coping strategies to deal with the high levels of emotion. Paradoxically, these coping strategies served as normal and healthy adaptive defenses and for potentially destructive purposes. The coping strategies not only failed to resolve their ambivalent feelings but they also generated increased levels of emotion (R. Smith, 2003; R. Smith & Dirkx, 2003). In K. Smith and Berg’s (1987) words, the feelings of “hitting a wall” are descriptions of group stuckness.
According to K. Smith and Berg's (1987) theory, the groups were caught in several paradoxical tensions or conflicts around their fears of estrangement from the group and/or fears of obliteration of their individual identity. Attempts to avoid the conflict or to fix it by adopting the coping strategies not only fail to resolve the tension the participants face but in fact usually throw the group deeper into the paradox, the feeling of being stuck, and, therefore, additional emotional tension.

The coping strategies also crystallized the recognition of difference among group members. The findings suggest that participants reacted to different levels of expertise, age, perspectives, language proficiency, and so forth as though they were bad and potentially harmful to the group. Certain group members, such as those with sociocultural differences, were perceived as the “other” and treated as a threat to the group in ways that mirror hierarchical structures within the larger society (Cheng et al., 1998; Wells, 1995; Winters, 1974), thereby creating unsafe learning spaces.

K. Smith and Berg (1987) speculate that when group members explore and own the underlying fears that caused the tension, opportunities for both individual and group growth and development remain possible because the need for destructive defense mechanisms diminishes. That is, group members are better able to work across their differences in more healthy ways. Participants such as Autumn, Sophia, and India demonstrated their ability to claim their fears and own their paradoxical behavior. The course ended when the participants made these revelations, therefore, it is impossible to ascertain the reasons for and the duration of the identity changes.

The group-as-a-whole process (Gibbard, 1974; Hartman & Gibbard, 1974) and the paradoxical nature of group work (K. Smith & Berg, 1987) are documented in the research on therapy, workplace groups, and organizational change. Nevertheless, the literature on educational groups, with the exception of self-analytical groups, is scarce. This study thus adds to the research on these psychodynamic issues within small groups to include online collaborative groups.

The findings extend Trujillo’s (1997) and McConnell’s (2002) work. Trujillo used group-as-a-whole theories (Bennis & Shepard, 1956; Bion, 1961; K. Smith & Berg, 1987) to examine a committee charged to facilitate the redesign of a school’s major department. He concluded that the online group contains the same basic developmental characteristics as face-to-face groups. The present study, therefore, adds to Trujillo’s work and extends it to document aspects of the group individuation process within online collaborative groups.

McConnell (2002) used Tuckman’s (1965) model to examine group development. He found that although there was a strong sense of movements to each of Tuckman’s phases of group development, the movement was not linear but rather reflected a back-and-forth movement. The group individuation process may be helpful to explain the back-and-forth movement found in McConnell’s PBL groups.
The Online Environment

Although the individual and group growth and developmental processes demonstrated characteristics that mirror face-to-face collaborative groups, the findings suggested that the need to communicate with limited nonverbal communication cues and a lack of communication spontaneity added to the stress of online collaborative groups. Ann explains,

In face-to-face [groups] I think it's easier for people to say I'm really not getting this. Can we talk this through? I think it's easier to do in a face-to-face setting than when you are [communicating] through a chopped off script and say can we go back to something “x” person said five minutes ago?

In addition, the challenges associated with the need to communicate through the computer may have facilitated the strategies the groups used to cope with the tension. For example, Donald “yelled at the computer” rather than the group member who caused his frustration. Janis commented that she “was tired of the computer” in the same conversation in which she described her anxiety about excessive interaction with her group members.

Reeves and Nass (1996) studied individual reactions to the computer in face-to-face settings. They contend that people unconsciously assign responsibility for messages and the feelings associated with those messages to the most proximate source, such as the computer, rather than the originating source. Donald and Janis’s statements suggest that the computer evoked feelings that are usually attributed to the group. Reeves and Nass (1996) argue that people do not make unconscious distinctions between the real and the mediated. They take what the media presents as the real thing. The tensions the group members felt were instrumental for both individual (Kegan, 1982, 1994) and group development (Hartman & Gibbard, 1974). The computer may serve as a barrier that sits between the group and the members. In extrapolation, the computer may influence the participants’ opportunity to rework aspects of themselves as learners in order to make the required paradigmatic shift and the group individuation process.

Practical Implications

The findings have at least two practical implications. First, instructors need to facilitate the adaptive functions and minimize the destructive functions of the group individuation process. It might seem as though the instructor of this course failed to provide proper structure and guidance for the participants. Yet small-group scholars such as Miller, Trimbur, and Wilkes (1994) and K. Smith and Berg (1987) warn that if the instructor attempts to solve the group conflicts, she or he might stagnate or destroy the group. Instructors need to clearly understand behaviors that signal the normal adaptive functions and indications that warn of destructive utility. The
instructor must walk a very fine line between too few and too many interventions (Dirkx & Smith, 2004).

Second, years of research on group composition demonstrates that heterogeneous groups can increase innovation (O’Reilly, Williams, & Barsade, 1998), yet the group members can also experience increased levels of conflict. In fact, scholars such as Rosser (1997) assert that it may be better to have a homogeneous group than to hinder the learning of learners who are already marginalized. The findings suggest that important differences include and transcend traditional sociocultural differences (e.g., work experience, study habits); thus, it may be impossible to have truly homogeneous groups. Although there is insufficient evidence to draw strong conclusions regarding the differences within the groups in this regard, instructors should be aware of the psychological and political implications of the group composition.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY**

It is recommended that other research expand this study to include a longitudinal inquiry to follow the members into other courses and small-group experiences. Additional work is needed to understand the influence of the online environment on both the individual and group growth and development processes. Finally, more work is needed to better understand the political realities of online collaborative groups.

**REFERENCES**


