Making a Real Difference in a Virtual Context: Prosocial Motivation in an Education-oriented Virtual Team

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Abstract: Social presence, or the degree of awareness of the other person in a communication, is thought to hamper the functioning of virtual teams. To increase social presence, virtual teams' researchers have suggested technological options, such as the use of avatars. But in this paper, rather than on technology, we build on the human factor and on the nascent theory of prosocial motivation to examine how sharing about others' needs may increase social presence in virtual teams. In this action research project, we provide preliminary evidence of our argument with a real case of a team dispersed across Venezuela, Spain and France that prepares education-related materials. We discuss implications for research on information and communication technology in the education industry.

Key words: Action research, Education Industry, Prosocial motivation, Virtual teams

1. Objectives

The ongoing shift from an industrial to a service economy has increased the use of virtual teams to perform a variety of complex tasks. Organizations assemble virtual teams to reduce costs, increase operations flexibility, and leverage dispersed resources (e.g., expertise and innovation). Despite of their organizational benefits, however, virtual teams are plagued with some drawbacks that result from their two core characteristics of electronic dependence and geographic dispersion.

One of the weaknesses of virtual teams refers to social presence—the degree of awareness of the other person in a communication (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Social presence varies along a continuum, from text-only communications to face-to-face communications (Sallnäs, 2005), and is

thought to play a key role in virtual environments (Aragon, 2003; Mennecke, Triplett, Hassall, Conde, & Heer, 2011). Specifically, virtual teams are associated with less-than-optimum presence, and hence with decreased effectiveness (Giesbers, Rienties, Gijselaers, Segers, & Tempelaar, 2009).

Scholars have looked for ways to mitigate this negative effect of virtual communications on social presence, including through the use of bodily representations (i.e. avatars) (Mennecke et al., 2011), and graphical enhancing (Hassanein & Head, 2007). Hence, available research has suggested that technology, through specific developments, may somewhat alleviate its own negative effects on social presence.

Social presence in virtual teams, however, may be increased not only through new technology-supported processes, but also through socio-emotional processes. Group cohesion, for instance, has been shown to have a higher effect on social presence than media structure—audio conferencing vs. video conferencing (Yoo & Alavi, 2001). According to Yoo and Alavi (2001), indeed, while additional technology brings ambiguity that harms social presence, warm and sociable relationships induced by group cohesion tend to enhance social presence in a virtual context.

In this paper, we take a step toward investigating how socio-emotional processes in teams may increase social presence, by focusing on one of the more powerful team processes: motivation. Motivation, in general, refers to the forces that drives the direction, intensity, and persistence of attention, effort and behavior (Kanfer, 1990); in this paper, we propose to focus on its prosocial component: prosocial motivation (Grant, 2007; Grant & Berg, 2011).

In sum, the main objective of this paper is to uncover how and why prosocial motivation in virtual teams may enhance social presence in virtual teams.

2. Theoretical Framework

Within the emerging stream of research that looks at collective motivation, prosocial motivation, we suggest, bears a considerable potential for improving social presence. Prosocial motivation refers to the desire to protect and promote the well-being of others (Grant, 2007; Grant & Berg, 2011). Theorists of prosocial motivation apply a relational perspective to work, focusing on the question "For whom does the employee work?" rather than "What does the employee do?" (Grant, 2007). According to prosocial motivation theory, when employees are connected to the impact they have on the beneficiaries of their work, in terms of task significance —which enhances perceived impact on beneficiaries—and contact with beneficiaries—which enhances affective commitment to beneficiaries—, they are more motivated (Grant & Berg, 2011).

Prosocial motivation can be expressed toward different domains and beneficiaries. In terms of domains, prosocial motivation can vary in whether it is directed toward "physical well-being (health and safety), developmental well-being (learning and growth), psychological well-being (happiness and enjoyment), or material well-being (economic and financial status)" (Grant & Berg, 2011, p. 31). In terms of beneficiaries, prosocial motivation is directed toward individuals or groups, "toward others inside the organization (coworkers, supervisors) or outside the organization (clients, customers, suppliers)" (Grant & Berg, 2011, p. 31). Prosocial motivation is thought to have the

potential to increase shared team identity (Grant & Berg, 2011); hence, we suggest, to also increase social presence.

3. Methodology

The methodology used in this study is an action research approach conducted in a virtual organizational context in the education sector. The two authors are inside of one of the teams and are influenced by what is happening and are supporting the team members to improve their social presence in the virtual context. From this point of view, the authors are both participants and agents of change (Coughlan & Coghlan, 2002; McNiff, 2016)

An action research project is composed of two different analytical cycles acting simultaneously. The first is the problem-solving cycle. The second is the experiential learning cycle. In this study, we use the six-step problem-solving cycle developed by Coughlan and Coghlan (2002)– See Figure 1. Currently, the data gathering and data feedback include interviews and meetings with the team under study, the upper managers of the organization, and participations in meetings and projects led by the team. Data analysis includes the analysis of the current situation and challenges within the team and the generation and analysis of new ways of working with the team members (based on prosocial motivation and social presence). The authors generate and share ideas and knowledge and challenge the team members and upper managers to think from a new perspective. After the analysis, actions are planned and will be implemented. The cycle is planned to be iterated several times until a final proposal or action is implemented.

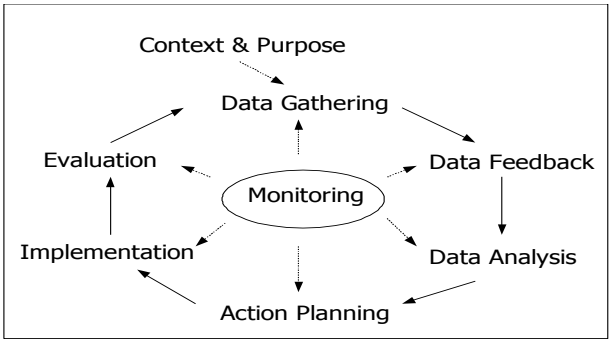


Figure 1. Action Research Problem-solving Cycle

With respect to the experiential learning cycle, the authors are following the Lewinian learning model developed by Kolb (2015)– See Figure 2. The Lewinian learning model will allow the authors to reflect on the different challenges and problems happening in the virtual team context. This self-reflection will allow the conceptualization and modelling of the specific experience in order to be meaningful to others (Coughlan & Coghlan, 2002; Eden & Huxham, 1996). The authors are also linking the emerging findings to the literature in order to enhance internal validity and the ability to generalize (Eisenhardt, 1989). Three literature streams are reviewed and analyzed to achieve this goal: 1) social presence (e.g., Aragon, 2003; Mennecke et al., 2011), 2) prosocial motivation (Grant, 2007; Grant & Berg, 2011), and 3) virtual teams (Gilson, Maynard, Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015; Pullan, 2016).

The Lewinian Experiential Learning Model

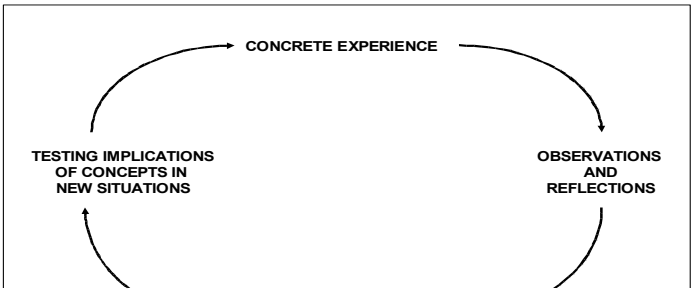


Figure 2: Action Research. The Lewinian Experiential Learning Model.

4. Discussion of Data, Evidence and Objects or Materials:

The Site: The E-learning Company.

The virtual team under study is one of the several teams operating within the E-learning company. The E-learning company produces multimedia materials for other firms (its B2B clients in Latin America) based on the clients' own contents or the development of new contents. For example, the production of multimedia materials related to the induction program of new employees (e.g. procedures, ethical and safety principles, etc.) or the production of new contents related to several different topics such as customer service, sales management, and time management. In addition, the multimedia materials are often uploaded and shown to the students through the E-learning company's Learning Management System (LMS). The company also offers videoconferencing and discussion forum services.

The virtual team under study is composed of people located in three different countries: Venezuela, Spain and France. The organizational model developed by the E-learning company is based on the concept of open, global and virtual teams. The

company searches for and recruits people with experience in the different types of activities of the e-learning sector, regardless where they are located. Under this approach, the company uses different technologies and platforms that allow the team members to work and interact virtually for different projects.

The team under study is in charge of preparing the virtual campus for the program to be run by the B2B customers. The preparation of the virtual campus includes the definition of the welcome message, the structure of the campus, the messages and announcements to be periodically released, the gamification activities related to the completion of each activity, the evaluation section and the issue of certification. The team members work together to prepare the structure and texts, upload the contents and materials, configure the gamification activities, define the parameters for the evaluation calculation and so on. There are different roles involved: program director, secretary, production role, and technology role.

5. Results and/or conclusions

Authors are currently gathering data, and will share their preliminary results at the conference.

6. Contributions and Scientific importance of this work

Our contention that concern for the needs of distant colleagues contributes to increase social presence—a key determinant of virtual teams effectiveness, may sound a bit paradoxical. But, as we argue and plan to empirically illustrate, prosocial motivation, by contributing to bridge the divide that separate members of virtual teams, represents a

powerful lever to increase the degree of awareness of geographically distant colleagues, and in turn improve key socio-emotional processes in virtual teams such as coordination, cohesion and trust, and finally team- and individual performance and satisfaction. We believe that our argument and project are especially relevant for the education sector, a context that provides multiple opportunities to protect and promote the well-being of others.

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