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Collective Mediation:

A neo-Vygotskian perspective of undergraduate
interdisciplinary group projects.

John M. Raven

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Abstract

With an underlying concern for grounding pedagogical practice, this study uses controversial methods to research a controversial issue: the dynamic between the social nature of learning and the isolating nature of computer technology. The context chosen for researching this concern comprises a case study of four groups that participated in an undergraduate interdisciplinary group project as part of their second year studies in business at the Auckland University of Technology, a programme marketed on the basis of the development of authentic skills and capabilities using this particular pedagogy. What is of interest is how the use of computer technology allowed the participants to co-construct meaning in this context.

This interest in the socially and culturally constructed aspects of human functioning rests upon a Vygotskian perspective, which I review along with various appropriations of this theory and other viewpoints in the literature review. Based upon this analysis, I then present a model for Collective Mediation, which views the computer as a mediational tool encompassed within the collaborative activity of the groups involved in this study. At this point I also suggest a protocol, or framework, for understanding this joint activity, which then guides the research methodology.

The primary source of data in the study consists of transcriptions of focus group meetings with the participants over a four-month period of time, a method that is justified by the requirements of the research to understand the multitude of relationships among the group members and with computer technology. To support triangulation, a questionnaire, log sheets, and member checks were also employed. The results reveal not only a rich fabric of activities and meanings, but a complex social dynamic guiding the events leading up to the construction of a joint project: one that was constrained, as well as supported, by the use of computers. In key areas, the pedagogy studied was shown to lack support.

This thesis adds material to the debate concerning the interface between the computer, as an increasingly complex medium for educational activities, and the social fabric created within an authentic group project at tertiary level. There are clear practical implications. On a theoretical level, the study adds to an understanding of how neo-Vygotskian theory can, or cannot, be interpreted to understand such settings and, in terms of methodology, the study introduces a new protocol for analysing the rich data set that is needed to capture the dynamics involved.

Acknowledgements

Phillips and Pugh warn that “taking a new job before finishing is a way of not getting a PhD” (1994, p.44). Well, I have always had itchy feet and a fondness for strange places and so, while researching for, and writing this thesis, I switched countries and academic positions not once, but twice. This resulted in much of it being completed by me in isolation with very few relevant resources being close at hand despite the Internet. So, it was a struggle like most of them are I hear although, of course, I had some support, both motivational and technical. In the end, it was the motivational support that mattered the most.

In this regard I particularly wish to thank Dr. Cindy Gunn of the American University of Sharjah, my wife and a fellow PhD candidate, whose fault it is actually that I got into this thing in the first place. It was in the form of a challenge, issued to me in Bath, England, five or so years ago. Some challenge! Cindy has been selfless in her support of my endeavour while at the same time taking over my share of looking after our two children, Joshua and Alana while I spent the requisite hours at the keyboard.

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Now it is finished, or “halas”, as they say in my present country of abode. I am looking forward to spending more time with my family and having fun, living life.

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