As we work with instructors in online teaching, a question we are frequently asked is why some online classroom groups seem to flourish while others flounder—despite their best attempts at community development, the students never seem to achieve a rhythm with one another or with the instructor. The same, of course, might be said about face-to-face classrooms. The answer lies in the classroom dynamics, and more specifically, in the group dynamics. With increased knowledge of online group dynamics, instructors can more easily adjust their strategies for dealing with problems such as difficult students or waning participation.

Clearly, a classroom, be it face-to-face or online, should not be viewed as a forum for group therapy. However, the need to develop a strong team, focused on learning collaboratively and completing collaborative assignments, promotes the need to understand team or group development. An instructor’s knowledge of group dynamics might not be important when teaching a subject such as accounting in the face-to-face classroom unless collaborative small group work is being used as a learning technique. Online, however, where much of the work is collaborative, observation and knowledge of the dynamics of the group become more critical even in courses such as accounting and the sciences.

In this chapter, we will focus on the nature of groups in cyberspace, examining theories of group formation and development and how they apply when the group is virtual. We will consider formation issues, stages and process of group development, and leadership issues. In so doing, we will review the importance
of working with conflict when it arises. In addition, we will explore why some virtual classroom groups work and others fail. We will also discuss working with difficult students in the online environment.

**Group Dynamics and Online Classroom Dynamics**

Until recently, the literature on group development has focused on stage theory. The most accepted of the stage theories is the one proposed by Tuckman and Jensen (1977). Stage theory states that groups go through five distinct stages in a relatively linear fashion: forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. We have seen all of our online groups go through the stages that Tuckman and Jensen describe. However, we have not seen it happen in that exact order. Frequently in the forming stage, online classroom groups will discuss the guidelines for the class, especially if encouraged to do so by the instructor. This may or may not lead to a storming stage, otherwise known as conflict. We find that conflict arises at varying points in the development of the group, and it is not uncommon for it to occur almost immediately. One of us had an experience with an online group that entered into a heated conflict in the second week of the class because two members felt that the expectations for course completion were unclear. In other classes, conflict occurred later in the group’s development, once members were feeling more comfortable with one another. All of our groups have performed to a lesser or greater extent throughout the course. The adjourning stage in online group development is also not distinct. We find that some classes end with no formal good-byes, and particularly if the group will be interacting with one another in other classes, either face-to-face or online, the group interaction continues, in essence “re-forming” to suit other circumstances.

Our experience, then, is more in line with more recent work that is focused on the integration of systems theory into group development and has begun to question the linear nature of Tuckman and Jensen’s model. McClure (1998) proposes a seven-stage model of group development. The stages he outlines are pre-forming, unity, disunity, conflict-confrontation, disharmony, harmony, and performing. He organizes these stages into a model of descent toward conflict and then ascent out of conflict with pre-forming, unity, and disunity as descending stages, conflict-confrontation as the apex of group development, and disharmony, harmony, and performing as ascending stages.

In small groups, individuals come together, create a purpose, and forge a collective identity. Initially in that process, individuality is constrained as a group identity forms. The descent represents the collective forging process. The vertex
depicts the crucial conflict stage. This is the turning point in groups where responsibility is shifted from the leader to the members. Once a strong bond is established, responsibility assumed, and a group identity emerges, individuality can be reclaimed, asserted, and expressed. The ascent signifies that reclamation process [McClure, 1998, p. 39].

McClure views group development as chaotic and self-organizing. Therefore, the movement between stages is not linear. In order to move from one stage to another, he proposes, the group must enter a chaotic phase that results in agreement—in verbal or nonverbal terms—by the majority to move to the next phase of development. He does not address the termination phase of the group because he believes that most groups rarely successfully negotiate all of the ascent stages. Instead, he proposes that groups move back and forth between harmony and disharmony, rarely achieving a true performing stage.

McClure also proposes that groups experience six issues of concern as they move through the phases of development, although as with the stages they may not experience the issues in order. The issues are safety, affiliation, dependence, independence, intimacy, and risk taking. We have certainly seen all of the issues of concern emerge in online classroom groups and believe that they are influential in the development of a good learning community. They emerge in the following ways:

• In order to feel comfortable in participating in the online class, students need to feel safe. The instructor’s responsibility is to create a safe container by providing guidelines and expectations that create a structure for the course and by encouraging students to express themselves in whatever way seems appropriate to them within that structure. In addition, the fact that most online classes are password-protected allows for a sense of privacy that encourages students to feel safe in the knowledge that their posts will not be read by people outside of the class.
• Affiliation is a key to the development of a learning community. Students need to feel that they are a part of something greater than themselves. They belong to a group that is engaged in working together to achieve a goal.
• Dependence on one another is an important by-product of affiliation. In order to sustain the learning community, students need to feel that they all can depend on the others to hold up their end of the bargain, so to speak. They need to know that they can count on their peers to provide feedback to them in a timely manner, contribute to online discussions, and do the work that is expected of them.
• Dependence on one another should not come at a price, however. Students in an online group need to feel that they can maintain their independence in the form of independent thought and feeling. Instructors should be on the lookout for
“groupthink”—when students appear to feel pressured to express the same opinions as others—and intervene if this occurs to move the discussion back to a place where independent thinking is the norm.

- Many instructors have commented on the level of intimacy that online classroom groups can and do achieve. The relative anonymity of the medium seems to free students to express thoughts they would likely not express face-to-face. Consequently, it is not unusual to see members of online groups sharing very intimate details of their lives. In addition, students in online classes tend to form intimate bonds with one another that frequently extend beyond the online classroom. Another way in which intimacy might be expressed is when students who are geographically dispersed get together with each other socially when visiting the area where another student lives. It is also not unusual to see conversations about meetings such as this occurring in the social area of the course site.

- Because of the sense of intimacy that members of online groups feel with one another, members feel comfortable taking risks and expressing ideas that may be controversial or less than “politically correct” because they have a sense that they will not be rejected by the group for doing so. Steve’s post about breast cancer research, which we presented in the last chapter, is an example of the type of post an instructor might see when students are engaging in risk-taking behavior. Risk-taking behavior might also take the form of confronting a member who is not participating or who has flamed another member of the group. We tend to see risk-taking behavior increase as the class progresses.

Because McClure’s model has been developed in working with face-to-face groups, it raises some questions. How does a model like his apply to online groups? The preceding paragraphs described how the six issues of concern might emerge. However, do all groups we work with in online classrooms experience the six issues of concern? When and where do these issues occur? How might the issues be addressed and encouraged? To explore these questions and gain further understanding of McClure’s model, let us look at the development of one online group.

Applying What We Understand About Groups to Online Classes

The following is a description of one group of students in an online class. We will view their development as a group using the stages proposed in McClure’s model and provide examples to illustrate their movement through each stage.
Pre-forming

Many of the students entering this class had never met one another previously and the instructor had not met any of the students face-to-face before the start of the class, which was delivered completely online. All had taken at least one online class previously. The course was an elective titled The Search for Soul and Spirit in the Workplace. Students were drawn to the course by their interest in the subject matter. Coincidentally, the instructor was working with two of the students in another online class simultaneously. The class began with the posting of introductions and learning objectives for the class. The instructor responded to each introduction, welcoming the students to the class. Following the instructor’s lead, students then began to respond to one another, connecting with elements of the posted introductions. The following are some examples of the type of connection that began to occur early on in the course.

Hi Shannon:

Thanks for your introduction. Sounds as though you are involved in some very creative and innovative projects. I am interested in reading your article regarding the common threads in all religions. The power of religious writings, I think, do come from the stories, examples and metaphors. Let me know when and where it will be available. It is interesting how each member of this group has expressed a delightful curiosity about spirit and soul. It should make for some great dialogue. And, hopefully it will help you in your search along your life path. Thanks for the intro. . . .

Take care,

Karen

Hi Shannon,

Glad you looped back for the introduction! We have at least three things in common: the Midwest (Kansas, in my case), an interest in San Diego (you’re there and I’d like to be) and a healthy suspicion of work environments that try to entice people to buy into the illusion that everything they need as an individual can come from the work experience. I’m looking forward to more conversation with you! Laurie

Unity

As part of the course design, students were asked to take responsibility for facilitating one week of the discussion for the course based on their interest either in the topic for the week or in some of the assigned reading. The group was able to complete this task with only minor difficulty. Following the negotiations, discussion of course material began. Discussion was lively and active. The following are a couple of bits of discussion from the first week of the class, illustrating the group’s
attempts at coming together to achieve their learning objectives. The dialogue is supportive and professional, expressing slight disagreement but avoiding any areas of controversy. The avoidance of conflict or controversy is typical of a group in the unity phase of development.

Thank you Peter for getting us started. I agree with what you have put out here for us to consider. I especially liked where you said “I think one way organizations could help their employees bring their soul and spirit into the workplace would be to start examining what’s enough, and to relax some of the incessant pressure that seems to permeate today’s workplace.” I think this is a huge leap though... You are right on when you said “A more likely strategy would be for individual employees, you and I, to start asking that question in our own personal lives. Once we’ve got enough, we’re free to choose whether we’ll work those extra hours or not. It really frees you up from your work; it provides the space required to restore a balance in your life—the space required to nurture your body, mind and spirit.” I have a friend that works four weeks on and then has two weeks off. This R&R he traveled, leaving the day he got off work and returning home the day before he flies out for work again. Next time he is taking three weeks off and is basically doing the same thing. This means that he will be away from his home for 3 months straight. All of a sudden he is feeling like he is never at home and the house is suffering. Today I asked why he scheduled his travel so tightly? Then I asked why when he travels he insists on packing the vacation with something to do every minute of the day. I always try to include one or two days of doing nothing. No wonder he is stretched to the point of breaking. He has not learned to say enough! Sharon

Pete:

I think you have asked an important question, “why is it that everyone feels compelled to work so hard at their jobs?” Perhaps, this is the type of culture organizations have fostered and encouraged? Over a period of time it becomes an explicit or implicit expectation. People get caught on the treadmill and consider long hours normal behavior. Fortunately, there are people who are more reflective and mindful of the need for balance and harmony, both personally and professionally. Yesterday I was working with a group of young professional people in a relatively large organization. It is not unusual for most of these people to routinely work 60–70 hours a week. One of the people described his work as being like “a rat in a maze”. None have them have a sense of joy or contentment, yet, they continue putting in the hours with little (if any) quality of life. The good news Pete, is they are starting to independently ask the very question... when is enough, enough? This type of dialogue is beginning to become more common place in organizations. People are truly searching for something more meaningful. I sense people have a lot more questions to these type of issues than they have answers. I am not sure the answers are as simple as taking more vacation time or more time off. Thanks for the conversation, Karen
Disunity

This group showed great interest in the topics discussed and actively engaged in conversation weekly, far exceeding the twice-weekly required number of posts. One member tended to hold divergent opinions from the rest but felt comfortable expressing them, and by two or three weeks into the course she had no difficulty entering into disagreement with the other members. The risk-taking behavior and ability to disagree both with the instructor and with each other, with no apparent repercussion, created an atmosphere of safety in the group that allowed the group to begin to move into the first of the conflict phases: disunity. Shannon’s contributions never went unacknowledged. At this phase of group development, whenever she posted a message, such as the one that follows, one member of the group would support her willingness to speak out without contradicting her opinions.

Sharon—

Oh yeah again! I love this interaction and these challenges to my thoughts. I have commented by each of yours below:

“I do believe that they can be instrumental in helping a person find it for themselves.” Note my comments to Rena and Karen earlier about how an organization is only a structure with out its members. It’s the members that form a chain to create the organization in the first place. And if the organization is it’s individuals then yes the organization is instrumental in the influence of spirit and soul. But again what you refer to as the organization is then synonymous with the individuals, rather than the structure. Also refer to my comments to Karen about the chain effect of organizations. “How many times do we hear someone say “I have the greatest job in the world because I get to do what I love most” and we think “wow they sure are lucky”? I never say this. I would never (never say never though) stay in a job that I did not thoroughly love. This life is precious to me, each moment counts. There is absolutely no reason to do anything short of what I love. But yes several other people do feel this way. I think this is an effect of not following their truth, or more often not knowing what their truth is. [truth is often used by me in the same frame as spirit—as I have here] What if “what they are” is not something that they can use to feed, cloth and house their families? Here is one of those reasons everyone is going to reply with why they do not follow their truths or stay in jobs they do not enjoy. I say this is a lack of responsibility to their spirit. They are not honoring their spirit, they do not have faith. If you do what you love, live your truth 100% the rest will follow. How many times have people finally stepped out of that comfort zone, said enough is enough and found that they are 500% better off than they were before. Often—but not always—this means making more money, etc. . . . Where there’s a will there’s a way. No one said it was easy—but it does work! . . . I attempt to live my truth, I love what I do, I wake up happier than the day before everyday and I would say I am doing pretty good in all aspects of my life so far. . . . So idealistic or not, if I don’t think them they will never be. If I do
think them, they may be. I like my odds better in the latter. Combined with my experience with it—it works for me and that’s all I can say. Shannon

Thanks for going out on a limb, Shannon. . . . it’s something I could have done more of throughout all of my courses. In response to your point that it isn’t the organization’s responsibility to bring spirit or soul into the workplace but it is their responsibility to allow it, I think I agree. I also think it is the organization’s responsibility not to stifle it or destroy it. Maybe that means there is an omission and commission aspect to this. What do you think? I also agree with your idea that you either know that an organization lives it’s truth or doesn’t, although I don’t think you can see that as easily from the outside (and when you’re inside it may be too late!) The way I think of that the organization is dysfunctional because it is out of integrity with itself, much like your description. Laurie

Conflict-Confrontation

Unlike other groups with which we have worked, this particular group never really experienced a strong confrontational phase. They continued to disagree with one another and felt safe voicing that disagreement. Their disagreements continued to be professional and related to ideas, rather than becoming personal. They continued to remain supportive of one another throughout. This may be because the group was enrolled in a graduate-level seminar. All were adult students who were working full-time. Consequently, their level of maturity and professionalism as individuals was greater. They were able to create a safe atmosphere of healthy disagreement that did not result in confrontation. An unspoken norm of acceptance of all opinions was established by the group early on and maintained throughout the course.

Disharmony

As the group moved toward the performing stages, participation remained strong for all but Shannon, whose participation became slightly spotty. Shannon, the student who tended to voice the most disagreement with the opinions of others in the group, dropped away for a short time, claiming that she had first, a computer virus, and then later, a troubled friend who needed her attention. Other students expressed some concern about her absence and welcomed her return when she rejoined the group. Although she described some personal issues in her life that had drawn her away, it is possible that she felt somewhat uncomfortable with being the group member to spark conflict and give voice to different and dissenting opinions and thus withdrew for a short time to allow the group to move beyond the conflict phases. Even in face-to-face groups, this is not unusual. A vocal
and more opinionated member of the group may not show up for a few sessions, leaving the other members to wonder why. The shift in group functioning and norms causes a sense of unease or disharmony that frequently results in a reexamination of norms and expectations.

Harmony

As we usually do when we create the course site for an online class, we included a social area—named The Sandbox—on this one. About midway through the quarter, the group began making extensive use of The Sandbox. One student posted a work problem with which she was dealing and several students jumped into a discussion on virtual leadership that was unrelated to the course material. Another student experienced a health scare during the term. He posted this in The Sandbox and was given extensive support from the others in the group. Simultaneously, the nature of participation in the course discussions became more harmonious. Shannon completely reengaged with the group and continued to feel safe expressing her opinions. The following is an exchange illustrating her reentry into the group:

I find this a hard question for some reason today. I have been grappling over these questions for hours, days it seems like. Had they been asked merely 6 months ago, last term for example, I could’ve popped up with a brilliant answer of my leadership gifts. I am left wondering if I can’t find the answers today because I am in a transitionary period. Transitions seem to clear the slate for me. They remind me of what I do not know, of what I have not grasped yet. They are the moments when I first begin to step out of that comfort zone I have been hiding in. . . . I think the biggest gift I offer people these days is power, personal power. I left my previous company because it misused power, stole power, misunderstood power and in the end lacked the power to achieve it’s dream because of it. In my choice to leave, combined with the dive I took into the dark sea of myself, I found my own personal power. Through that I found the ability to lead others to their own. I have a blessing in the ability to see the true spirit shining through people, past the [facade] we offer or the image we provide. When I was a social worker people always praised my ability to give great feedback. In business people always praised my ability to see the talents in others whether they exemplified it or not. That ability to bring others to fruition. Shannon

Your reference to being blessed was a good reminder to me, Shannon, that a lot of who we are was a gift to us! I, too, feel very blessed in the wonderful family of people I was born into. The gift of personal power and authorship that you offer people is truly a great one—a most significant way of enabling people and, by doing that, helping them create their own significance. Laurie
Shannon: I want to echo Laurie’s response to you. I found your comments exceptionally powerful and thought provoking. What a wonderful gift of insight you have into your own behavior. It sounds as though you are really going through a wonderful and fascinating period of growth? And, the benefit is you have a better sense of yourself and what you want (at least for this moment in time) is that a correct assumption? 

Karen

Performing

As the term progressed, this became a high-performing group. Despite earlier disagreements, group members developed significant regard for each other, their ideas, and their work. They began to reflect on their learning experience and commented that it was unlike others they had experienced, either online or face-to-face. Participation levels throughout the term were extremely high. It was not uncommon for this group of seven students to generate somewhere between 110 and 150 postings per week. Despite personal issues that periodically interfered with the ability of a couple of students to participate at the same level as the others, overall participation was relatively evenly dispersed across the group. The learning objectives for the course, as described by the instructor, were these: “This course will explore recent writings on the search for soul and spirit in the workplace, as well as how it affects the notions of meaningful work, leadership, and organizational change. We will also explore these concepts as they pertain to your personal search for meaning in the work you do.”

The following are some student reflections on the achievement of learning outcomes in this course:

As many have mentioned, this particular virtual environment has been an exceptionally open, engaging process. Jointly, we have raised thought provoking questions, responded to one another with care and respect and we have encouraged one another to reflect and think. I have routinely enjoyed logging on to Felix and reviewing the ongoing conversations and comments. Whatever the topic, some humorous, some serious, some soul-searching, I always felt we sincerely listened to each other. Our entire learning community contributed to the development of incredibly rich and stimulating ongoing conversation. It seems as though we discovered a common ground for learning and we were willing to openly trust each other to honor our thoughts and our feelings. Perhaps for a brief moment in time we found a safe harbor, where it was acceptable to be vulnerable. I know I will reflect on our conversations as I continue to work through some of these issues of soul and spirit. It is an never ending process of discovery. I feel exceptionally blessed to have been surrounded by six talented and gifted learning partners in this journey. You hold a special place in my heart. 

Karen
My learning objective for this seminar was to gain some new insights and strategies I could use with myself and others to bring more soulfulness and spirit into the workplace. Our dialogue over the past 10 weeks has exceeded my expectations. . . . I think it’s amazing the way this group came together and shared such intensely personal information. With the exception of Shan and Karen, I didn’t know anyone else in the group at the outset of the EBS, and yet now I feel as if I know you better than many people I’m in contact with every day. I feel very safe with you. I’m sure, one reason is that we’ve engaged each other at the level of our soul and spirit. Pete

Concluding Thoughts About the Soul and Spirit Group

As previously mentioned, the members of the group enrolled in The Search for Soul and Spirit in the Workplace were mature, professional working adults. Their experience with online classes varied but all had taken at least one online class previously. Not all of the students had worked together previously, however. The class was an elective, not a required course. Consequently, all students were there voluntarily. All of these factors contributed to a very positive group experience.

The group did, however, move through conflict on its way to the harmony and performing stages of group development. Early on, they worked hard to get to know one another and establish unspoken norms of open, accepting participation. Active participation also became a norm for this group as they far exceeded the mandatory guideline of two posts per week.

This may appear to be an ideal group experience, yet it is one that we have had often as we teach online classes. Allowing space for the group to move through its developmental phases contributes positively to the achievement of learning objectives. What would have happened if the instructor had stopped the emergence of conflict by silencing the dissenting voice? Most likely, this would have become what McClure describes as a regressive group, never able to move to the harmony and performing stages.

What this example does tell us is that it is important for an instructor to look for signs that the group is moving through stages of development. It is not necessary to comment on this to the group, but it may become necessary to facilitate movement to the next stage if the group becomes stuck in the conflict phases.

Other Ways of Looking at Online Groups

McGrath and Hollingshead (1994) have focused their work on the study of online work groups, attempting to establish the impact of technology on team development. Rather than looking at online groups as moving through various stages, this
model looks at the numerous factors that lead to successful or unsuccessful outcomes when online groups come together to perform various tasks.

The essential elements of McGrath and Hollingshead’s model can be distilled down to three that have equal influence over each other: people, tasks, and technology. McGrath and Hollingshead further argue that there are three functions that online groups strive to achieve:

- **Production**, or the ability to complete a tangible task
- **Well-being**, or a sense of individual satisfaction and that individual needs are being met through the group
- **Member support**, or a sense that a safe space has been created through which members can support each other in achieving their collaborative task

Online groups attempt to achieve these functions through four modes of operation:

- **Inception**, or what McClure would likely call pre-forming, during which group members begin to work together to understand their common task
- **Problem solving**, which is considered to be the main reason why task-oriented groups come together online
- **Conflict resolution**, a critical factor in successfully completing tasks together
- **Execution**, or the completion of the task

McGrath and Hollingshead argue that, rather than moving through the modes in linear fashion, online groups may move back and forth between each mode, with each function manifested in each mode. The example of the Soul and Spirit group we just presented illustrates all aspects of the McGrath and Hollingshead model. Certainly, the group completed their task together, felt good about what they were able to accomplish in the process, and supported one another throughout. They were able to discuss and solve problems together, resolve conflict easily, and perform well as a group.

Schopler, Abell, and Galinsky (1998), with yet another way of observing online groups, note the importance of looking at the differences between online and face-to-face groups from three system levels: individual, group, and environmental. They state that on an individual level, members may feel freer to be more independent, set their own pace in asynchronous discussion, and try out new roles and behaviors. Because of the absence of social cues, such as facial expression and tone of voice, it may be more difficult for members to assess the mood or intent of other members and thus communications may be more easily misinterpreted. In addition, because of the relative anonymity of the medium, members may have
fewer inhibitions, leading to more impulsive responses. Posting reminders of guidelines and norms of behavior may therefore be necessary.

Pratt (1996) adds to our understanding of the individual level with his description and discussion of what he terms **electronic personality**. He proposes that when individuals enter the online environment, they allow parts of their personalities that are not seen face-to-face to emerge. Introverts tend to flourish online because of the absence of the social cues and body language that are somewhat inhibiting to them in face-to-face situations. They therefore tend to become more extroverted in their participation in online groups. Extroverts, in contrast, have more difficulty establishing a “presence” online. Because they tend to be more verbal in face-to-face situations, extroverts can easily make social connections and let others know who they are. This is more difficult for them to do in the flat, text-based medium. The ability to free up parts of ourselves online helps level the playing field in online groups, allowing for more even participation from all members regardless of their introversion or extroversion. It also allows people to try out new roles and behaviors.

On a group level, Schopler, Abell, and Galinsky note that the pacing of responses makes for time gaps, which can be both positive and negative in terms of group development. The time gaps can promote reflection but can also create uncomfortable feelings for members who feel their needs and concerns are not being addressed by the group. Some researchers, however, support our own experience that it is possible to develop greater group cohesion in a shorter period of time in technology-based groups (Mennecke, Hoffer, and Wynne, 1992). The ability to engage in informal discussion unrelated to the task that brings the group together assists with this process. In other words, groups need to be given a space in which they can connect with each other on a social level and begin to know each other as people apart from the task that brings them together. In face-to-face teams or groups, informal connections happen outside of the classroom and may be encouraged by the instructor or facilitator. The same opportunity needs to be provided for online groups in order to allow for group cohesion and more satisfactory task completion. The Soul and Spirit group made good use of the social area created for their course. They supported one another through life and health crises, discussed work issues, and also discussed issues of intimacy as a group.

Finally, the environmental realm is clearly made up of the technology that is used. The technology should be a vehicle that ensures clear, unrestricted communication in order to support good group development. In addition, group members need access to technical support should anything occur that interferes with their ability to communicate with the group.

Figure 8.1 summarizes the theories of group development as they relate to online groups. It shows the connections between the individuals, the group, the
Students enter online classes with a concern about the task to be accomplished. In other words, they hope to complete the course in which they have registered with a minimum of difficulty and to feel good about the outcome. What attracts individual students to the online environment is the ability to work at their own pace using asynchronous communication. What is often a surprise is the ability to engage with the material and the instructor in a different way. Students are sometimes surprised by the more facilitative role of the instructor, the directive to function both more independently and collaboratively at the same time, and the need to become good managers of their own time given the demands of online classes.

Peers

The role of the group is critical to the success of the online class. A well-designed online class will intentionally build a learning community by providing opportunities for teamwork, the completion of collaborative assignments, and the ability to reflect on the process and the learning. Working with an online group can serve to reduce the sense of isolation that some students have described in taking online classes that lacked interaction. Encouraging students to become part of a whole by joining an online classroom group increases the likelihood that they will stay involved and motivated, because successful completion of the task (in other words, completion of the course) is a collaborative effort.

Another reason why a learning community is important is because it provides social connections that allow students to get to know one another as people. This too increases the likelihood that students will want to stay involved. They will be
FIGURE 8.1. THE ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE ONLINE GROUPS.

Individual
- Sense of accomplishment
- Quality of outcome
- Satisfaction with the process
- Ability to work at own pace
- Sense of self-expression

Facilitator
- Comfort with technology in use
- Competence with online facilitation
- Ability to communicate clearly and in a balanced way
- Comfort with a reasonable degree of chaos and conflict
- Creation of safe container for the group
- Nurturance of the development of relationships
- Promotion of self-organization and empowerment

Group
- Collaboration
- Teamwork
- Sense of well-being and support
- Reflection
- Reduced isolation

Task
- A common sense of purpose
- Source of motivation to participate
- Source of collaboration

Using Technology, Online Groups
- Problem Solve
- Manage Conflict
- Develop Norms
- Process Information Together
- Communicate with One Another
- Connect

Technology
- Communication and task completion
- Unrestricted communication
- Transparency and ease of use

Group Elements of Effective Online Groups

Collaboration
Teamwork
Sense of well-being and support
Reflection
Reduced isolation

FIGURE 8.1. THE ELEMENTS OF EFFECTIVE ONLINE GROUPS.
reluctant to let down their friends by not participating in discussions or other activities. They come to see their contributions as important to the learning process of the whole group and not just to the achievement of their own learning objectives. The focus, then, becomes the learning process and involvement in a learning community, and not simply completing the course or earning a passing grade.

**Technology**

The course technology should be considered only a vehicle for its delivery and as such should be transparent and easy to use with minimal instruction. The technology allows for the creation of a meeting place online where students can con-
nect with one another for both social and task-oriented reasons. The technology itself should not be the reason a course is offered, but rather an important supportive factor in its success.

Task

Clearly, the task that brings students together is to complete the course. In that regard, the task creates the sense of purpose for both the students and the instructor. A well-developed course should motivate students. If the material presented is relevant and the task is structured to empower students to take charge of the learning process, they will be more likely to stay with it through successful completion. Multiple opportunities for teamwork and collaboration will reinforce the sense of common purpose and provide opportunities for students to take charge of their learning.

Instructor

We have already discussed some of the critical characteristics of a successful online instructor, including flexibility, responsiveness to students, a willingness to learn and a self-perception as a lifelong learner, an ability to balance amount of participation in the group, and most importantly, comfort with and the ability to facilitate the development of an online learning community. Instructors who are flexible, open, and willing to go with the flow of an online class are likely to have a successful experience. They must, however, be prepared to deal with the conflict that will inevitably emerge in an online group and develop a means by which to work with it successfully so that the group can move on to achieve its task together.

Conflict Revisited

McClure (1998) states that conflict is a central feature of all groups. It is not a feature that should be feared but instead welcomed, because the presence of conflict indicates that the group is developing successfully. McGrath and Hollingshead (1994) also note that in online groups the ability to resolve conflict is one of the central tasks to be accomplished in order for the goals to be achieved and the tasks completed.

Frequently, the word conflict brings to mind an all-out struggle, complete with anger, hurt feelings, and a win-lose outcome. In the online group, however, conflict may simply take the form of disagreement with the instructor or between students. At times it may become heated and be perceived as an attack. When this
happens, the instructor should step in to resolve it. However, in many cases stu-
dents can resolve these disagreements for themselves. Sometimes, resolution may
take the form of agreeing to disagree.

Asking students to reflect on the conflict and its resolution can add an element
to the learning experience that can be extremely useful to them in their overall re-
fections about online learning and how it differs from the face-to-face classroom.
The following example of conflict and confrontation over the spotty participation
of a group member is one that demonstrates growing understanding on the part
of students about the need for all to be involved if learning online is to be success-
ful. Although the tone is somewhat harsh, it reflects these students’ strong feelings
about their dependence on one another in order for their learning objectives to
be achieved.

You [Phillip] have mentioned on 3 or 4 occasions, how busy you have been, sleep-
less nights, coming into this process late, an outcast, x number of consulting pro-
posals. . . . Focus on the participation, learning and the contribution. Let this other
stuff go. We are all extremely busy and quite frankly not interested in being reminded
how overwhelmed we all are. The boat we are in is the same. The waters are equally
turbulent, only our perspectives differ. . . . You are always selling! Seek to understand
first. Larry

I want to “jump” in here and offer some observations on things that I have seen. I
agree Larry, that asking questions is paramount to understanding. I can see that you
are striving to “read between the lines” and understand all that is being said. I ap-
preciate this endeavor very much. However, I also agree with Allison’s statement: “Not
EVERYthing can be answered with another question.—I’m really worried that this is
coming out whiny or out of line, but I wanted to state an observation of mine . . . a
personal opinion (I don’t think that was whiny at all, by the way). In my opinion Larry,
I also agree with her that you seem to be a little defensive . . . and I will even add . . .
sometimes it comes across with a little bit of an “attacking” feeling to me. Perhaps this
is simply your pure desire to understand. I know that this is what you are constantly
seeking to teach me. . . . “Seek first to understand.” I appreciate this very much and
will strive to do so. I also am reminded of a proverb, which basically says, “people often
teach what they most need to learn.” Just food for thought. Asking the kinds of ques-
tions you tend to ask are extremely important and I am thankful for your insight and
attempts to clarify and hope to be able to ask such penetrating questions myself. How-
ever, there seems to be something missing in your responses and I think that there is
not very much sharing of something deeper . . . no collaboration. You mainly just re-
spond by asking for further clarification or with a reason for your previous response. It’s
a real cognitive approach. I wonder how do you “feeeeeeel.” That is what I want to
know, instead of always being asked another question. So I will ask you now, how do
you feel about me, what are you so angry with me about? Phillip
What might be interpreted by some as petty bickering actually signals the presence of conflict. In fact, this exchange opened the door for others in the group to begin discussing what they saw as appropriate participation. Although Larry and Phillip settled their difference easily once the conflict surfaced, the issue of levels of participation continued well into the course and resurfaced involving other students. They soon began to realize that their expectations of one another and their need to rely on one another for their learning was the issue. Important learning about the process of an online class was gained overall, beginning with this exchange.

A good rule of thumb is for students to wait twenty-four hours before responding to a post they feel is negative. This allows for a cooling-off period and a time to reflect. When a student returns to a post that was initially seen as offensive, he or she may find that, on second reading, it is not so bad. This time-out also gives students a chance to respond from a place of reason rather than anger, thus helping to reduce the possibility that the conflict will escalate. In the previous series of exchanges, Larry is asking Phillip to do just that—wait and reflect rather than react. Phillip is asking Larry to look at the way in which he approaches not only him but also the rest of the group. The students involved are demonstrating the ability to manage their own conflict situation. The instructor intervened only to ask the students to reflect overall on the process, but waited until the conflict had abated before doing so.

Just thought I'd stick my nose in for a second—several of you have been commenting about the need for Phillip to get involved with this process and fearing that he would not. He did—in a big way, in my humble opinion—in his last post by opening himself up to the group in a rather courageous way, I thought, and contributing his thoughts on the task and process. The response was nothing, nada, zilch! I thought it was interesting to note, and thought it was important for all of you to reflect on it a bit. Rena

Rena, you are right, Phillip did jump in and no one commented. I thought that it was great that Phillip is back in the game. But, as Stasi said, wasn’t going to applaud until I see results over time. It is sort of like making friends. It is not difficult to be nice, witty, thoughtful, etc. for one day. . . . I am looking for a commitment to the group. That commitment means more than popping in once a week on the weekends. Michele

Like Stasi, I too am confused by your comments regarding Phillip. He posted a long time ago (under group discussions) . . . and, yes, it was long and philosophical . . . and was a response to Michele and Stasi, so I didn’t think it was right for me to get in the middle of it. I was hopeful that after that posting he would get much more involved on a day to day basis. Instead another week lapsed and now we have the one he just posted today. So, after reading it, I don’t see where it needs a response either. It seems
as though he is giving Larry feedback and then entering into our group process just as the rest of us have. I am hopeful that this is a sign that he’s back in to help us.

Allison

I really think, gang, that you need to take a look at the role that Phillip is playing in this group and your responses (or lack thereof) to him. I also need to say that if it weren’t Phillip, it would be someone else. I just noticed something that clearly the others of you didn’t based on your confusion in response to my post—you’ve been asking him to jump in and some have expressed concern that he wouldn’t. When he did, you just kept on rolling like nothing had happened. . . . Again, I’m not blaming, shaming, defending, or anything else like that—just asking you to reflect on your own process and dynamics. . . . I have noticed, and there’s no judgment intended with this comment—again neutral observation—that everyone is fine with the level with which Chad is able to participate (which is low compared to others) and yet when Phillip participates at actually a higher level, it’s his participation that gets questioned. I’d like you, once again, to simply reflect on this. Maybe no comment is even necessary—just notice and reflect.

Rena

The response to the instructor’s observations in this case was a series of “aha’s” for the group’s members. They began to recognize what conflict looks like. They also began to understand the roles that various group members were playing and their responses to their own expectations about other group members. The following posts reflect the changes that occurred as a result and indicate that the group is beginning to move out of conflict:

I am feeling particularly disappointed and frustrated. I would not say that my experience with teams, in general, has not been totally gratifying. There are probably several reasons for that, partly due to what may be unrealistic expectations on my part and partly due, in my opinion, to others not fulfilling their obligation to the group or the agreed upon norms or rules. I guess that I am trying to understand where Phillip and Chad are coming from and I am frustrated because I can’t seem to engage Chad in dialogue and Phillip doesn’t seem to get what people are saying. I take participation and leadership on a team very seriously. In regard to my participation, I have had to work very hard to meet the norm of reading once a day and posting every other day. And, I have tried to provide something in the posts that would add or expand the group’s work, help move the group forward, and/or encourage and recognize group members. Maybe this is the norm I have established for myself and it is unrealistic to expect it from others. . . . This is the part that feels like the groups I have been part of before. Some people actively participate and add, some hang back and observe, various levels of trust and individual interpretations of the information at hand, individual interpretations of the appropriate levels of commitment to self and commitment to the group. Michele
I have read your comments pointed to Chad and Phillip as well as the other Cohort member’s comments and have decided not to play in this arena, until now. I am clear that norms have been established and I am also excited with the participation from the group. I look positively at the direction we have taken, the progress that we have made and value everyone’s input. My focus remains on what we are accomplishing collectively as well as what I am learning through this process. I am delighted with the results. There is so much stuff that goes on in other people’s lives that I try (not always successful) to give them the full benefit of the doubt. I am still learning to hold everyone legitimate and sometimes it is not easy for me. Rena’s posting with regard to the group’s lack of response to Phillip’s posting helped me advance my understanding in this regard even more. This group has dealt with a lot. I have learned so much in such a short time and I am grateful. There will never be a group where there is “equal participation” in everyone’s eyes and the value of the individual contribution is the real jewel.

Larry

It is best, then, for instructors to take a position of noninvolvement and observation when conflict first surfaces. Often students are very capable of working through the issues and achieving successful resolution. However, if the conflict escalates, interferes with progress of the class, or turns into personal attacks or flaming, then the instructor must intervene. Things often begin to quiet down after a post by the instructor setting a limit or asking students to take the conflict offline, or after the instructor has individual conversations with the students involved. If, however, these actions do not work, or if the conflict is perpetuated by a difficult student, it may become necessary to take additional steps.

Working with Difficult Students

Just as in the face-to-face classroom, difficult students appear in the online classroom. The difficulty can take many forms: being unable to adjust to the technology; dominating the conversation; refusing to participate at an adequate level; blaming the instructor, other students, or the program for their lack of satisfactory progress; and bullying other students or the instructor through flaming. In the face-to-face classroom, an instructor may become quickly aware of the presence of a difficult student. But in the online classroom, difficulties may not show up as quickly or may be unrecognizable at first. For example, it is common for students new to the online arena to experience some problems with the technology. Some may require the assistance of the instructor or other technical support staff to resolve their technical difficulties. When difficulties go on for several weeks, however, red flags may start to go up for the instructor and the other students: Is this someone who truly is having difficulty or is this a smokescreen for refusal to participate at the level required?
When instructors diagnose a difficult student, it is important to take steps that they would also take in a face-to-face situation. For example, if an instructor would schedule an individual conversation with a student who is causing problems such as dominating classroom conversation or being argumentative, she should do so with the online student as well. The conversation might take place via e-mail, or the instructor may choose to have a telephone conversation or face-to-face meeting with the student. It is important to recognize that not all conversations need to happen on the course site. Sometimes taking the problem off-line can be more helpful than trying to confront or deal with the student publicly. Regardless of how and where the conversation occurs, it is important for the instructor to provide concrete examples of the behavior in question. The beauty of the online environment is that asynchronous discussion is archived on the course site. Therefore, it is relatively easy for the instructor to point out where and how the problem occurred and give specific suggestions for improvement.

If a problem student is unresponsive to instructor intervention, then once again best practices should prevail. Perhaps the student’s access to the course should be suspended until the problem is resolved. The instructor may need to request help from department or program administration if an administrative solution, such as permanently removing the student from the class, becomes necessary.

As we’ve noted many times, successful achievement of learning outcomes is dependent on the creation of a learning community. Students depend on good participation from one another to build that community. Consequently, an instructor cannot afford to take a passive stance or wait too long when problems are spotted. Decisive action must be taken and limits set when behavior is unacceptable in order to salvage the learning experience for the majority.

**When It Simply Isn’t Working**

There are times when, despite our best efforts, we are unable to facilitate successful formation of an online learning community or create a sense of group among the learners. It is easy for an instructor to blame himself or herself when this occurs, saying, “Surely there is something else I could have done.” However, when we have experienced this phenomenon, there is usually a student who offers “a voice of reason” by giving us some feedback that offers clues to what went wrong. The following story of such an experience includes excerpts from an online conversation between one student and the instructor after the class ended during an attempt to discern what transpired in an unsuccessful online learning experience. Interestingly, the class in question was another section of *The Search for Soul and Spirit in the Workplace* offered at a graduate level.
The class began in fairly typical fashion with the instructor asking that introductions be posted online. This was not the first online class taken by this group of students. Due to the nature of the program in which the students were enrolled, the participants had met one another at a face-to-face session to kick off other classes taken before this one. However, the instructor was not present at that session. Because of this, the instructor faced an immediate challenge of establishing a relationship with and presence in the group. What became apparent to the instructor rather quickly was that there were two subgroups in the class, based on the grouping of the students when they met face-to-face. In addition, there were other concerns about the nature of the group.

As you know, I was so inspired by the course topic and drawn to the class, I had high hopes for rich dialogue and learning. The class size was small, and all female. I remember making an early comment on that and asking if people thought it was significant that we were all women. The answers that came back were just more questions. I do wonder if the balance in the class would have been different if we had some male participants. Beth

Although a problem for the group, the concern about group composition was put aside when students began complaining about a lack of clarity in the course design and an inability to determine what was expected of them. This proved confusing to the instructor, who had used the same course design very successfully several times previously.

Unfortunately, we had some early disconnects in the class—in the first week. People were unclear about the assignments (which is normal and has occurred in every class. We simply then post for clarification). One participant was particularly harsh and caustic in the tone of her writing. She was upset that you [the instructor] needed to travel for two or three days in the first week of the class and that you had some trouble connecting online (from Norway, was it?) A second participant joined in the disappointment. What I remember most was the tone of the exchange. It was accusatory and very judgmental, non-forgiving. I think we never fully recovered from this exchange that occurred so early in the class. Beth

Once the instructor was able to rejoin the class, after only two days of absence, she was surprised to find the level of confusion and upset present in the group. Quickly, this group had entered a phase of disunity and conflict from which it was difficult to recover. The conflict not only was directed toward the instructor but also occurred between the two subgroups within this small group of six students. The instructor expressed her concern and confusion over the level of hostility in the group. But any attempts she made to intervene in the conflict and reduce it were met with resistance and anger.
I would bristle whenever I read what the “toxic” participant would write. It was harder to log on and less rewarding than other classes I have been in where the exchange and discussion is so rich and supportive. I would come downstairs after doing schoolwork and debrief some of the things this one participant said and how she said it with my husband. I thought they missed a big point of the learning. Beth

Because participation continued to be poor and interchanges between the two students and the instructor and a few of the students with one another often bordered on flaming, the instructor attempted to have individual contacts with all of the students in the group, both via e-mail and phone. One student refused all contact with the instructor, whereas others responded fairly favorably to these exchanges. The instructor also enlisted the aid of the program chair who, when she attempted to intervene, also met with resistance and challenge. The difficult student withdrew from the class for a period of time and eventually made a decision to withdraw from the program, returning only to complete the class. Overall, students never fully participated in this class or achieved their learning objectives due to the early problems in the group.

I... observed how hard it was for you to try to mitigate all this online. It was helpful when you all would report that you had a conversation. If I recall, we had some improvement after that, but never a full recovery. ... My approach was to stay focused on the reasons I was in the class, continue to respond to everyone and try to foster dialogue, and to rise above what I saw as pettiness and lack of maturity. ... It was interesting and puzzling how individuals drawn to the topic of soul and spirit in the workplace spent so much time and thought on the dark side of spirit. Maybe they showed us the dark sides of their own spirits. Maybe they felt they had permission to do so, given the topic. I don’t know. At the end of the class, I remember thinking, for a class on soul and spirit, we didn’t have very much soul or spirit in our learning community. How sad. Beth

What are the lessons learned from working with a group such as this one? What can an instructor do when, despite all efforts at intervention, a learning community fails to form? The following are the key issues as they relate to these questions:

- The group in question contained not one but two difficult students, and the instructor was not clear about the programmatic guidelines in dealing with a student who is inappropriate in the online classroom.
- Decisive action was not taken with the difficult members, thus giving them “permission” to continue to act as they had. In hindsight, both the instructor and the program administrator agreed that had decisive action been taken early on,
such as setting clear limits on acceptable behavior in the class, the learning experience might have been saved.

- The makeup of the group was a problem from the beginning (small numbers, all female, all with the same level of online experience). McClure (1998) notes issues that emerge when a group is all female with a female leader and describes them as follows: “The early stages of group development are further complicated by member reactions to the female leader. These reactions range from ambivalence to confusion and rebellion” (p. 100). When debriefing this experience with administrative staff, it was noted that this fact should have been caught during registration and an attempt made to balance the group’s gender composition.

- The group was what McClure (1998) would refer to as “regressive.” In other words, it resisted movement out of conflict into harmony and performance. Some group members were intent on “killing the leader,” in McClure’s terms. When other group members refused to join them in their stance, the dynamics spiraled further downward.

The important thing to learn from a group that fails to establish itself successfully as a learning community is that often more than one factor contributes to the problems. It is rarely just the instructor and his or her facilitation techniques; we have seen good outcomes with inexperienced instructors who are just finding their way in online instruction. What is most important is for the instructor to try everything in his or her bag of tricks: openly discuss concerns about poor participation on the course site; contact students individually; if possible, have meetings with students; and when necessary, contact department or program administration to take decisive action with difficult students and consult with peers or colleagues for advice. The instructor must do something, and never simply allow students to flounder. Once the experience has ended, it is essential to review it in some fashion, preferably with supportive colleagues or a willing student participant, in order to glean the important lessons that will assist in avoiding the same situation in the future.

In this chapter and Chapter Seven we have discussed the critical importance of looking at and working with student issues in the development and delivery of an online course. Although we have repeatedly described this form of education as learner-centered, we have been as guilty as our colleagues in forgetting that the student is and should be the central focus of all online programs and courses. Focusing on the student and avoiding assumptions about what they know about online learning, how they might work through the process of the course, and why they may or may not be successful online has been a crucial piece of our own learning as online instructors. With this in mind, in our final chapter
we will summarize the lessons we have learned in working in the cyberspace class-
room and take a look ahead not only at new developments in online learning
but also at the impact of online learning on education as a whole.

Tips for Working with Online Classroom Dynamics

- Be clear about the instructor role as a facilitator. Making this explicit at the be-
inginning of an online class can prevent confusion and create agreement between
the instructor and students about expectations.
- Be clear about group tasks and expectations. The clearer the instructor is about
what is to be accomplished in the course, the less likely that students will be-
come confused and flounder.
- Expect students to move through phases as they develop their working group.
Asking questions about group development—such as, “How comfortable are
you feeling with one another as a group?”—as well as about their comfort level
with the process can help.
- Facilitate the process. Although we strongly support the empowerment of
students to take on their own learning process, instructor guidance and inter-
vention is necessary to keep things moving and on track. Chaos can ensue when
students lack appropriate instructor input.
- As Howard Rheingold (1993) states, always assume good intent. If a student
flames another student or the instructor, assume that it is inadvertent and came
out of good intentions, and respond accordingly.
- Wait twenty-four hours before responding to what you may consider to be a
personal attack; advise students to do the same. The intensity of the message
always seems to wane with time.
- Always address flaming. A skilled online facilitator put it well: “One voice can be
much louder online than off-line. . . . As a facilitator one must decide if they
will protect the right of anyone to say anything, or to draw a line or embrace a
certain set of norms which, at some point, pulls that one voice back out of the
spotlight to allow others back in. For me, this balance between control and emer-
gence is the most difficult, artful, and when it happens, glorious moment for an
online group facilitator when they can hold a space for both” (White, 2000).
- Expect conflict. Instead of viewing it as unhealthy, welcome it as a sign that the
group is developing. Facilitate movement through conflict so that students can
create norms for working with one another and successfully complete their tasks.
- Don’t mistake confusion for conflict. Sometimes students do become confused
about course expectations, guidelines, and assignments, and a simple explana-
tion on the part of the instructor is all that is needed to move the process forward.
• Ask for support and help when necessary and especially when dealing with difficult students. We have no problem doing that when teaching face-to-face; the same should be true online. Having individual meetings, by phone or in person, are appropriate when dealing with a difficult student. It is important also for instructors to know that they have the support of the administration to remove a difficult student from their online classes should that become necessary.

• As an instructor, use sidebar conversations carefully to avoid having all communication move through the instructor. Encourage students to use sidebars only for personal exchanges unrelated to the course. Concerns and comments about the course should be made on the course site, and whenever possible, conflict resolution with difficult students should occur there as well.