

The Psychodynamics of Distance Learning: The Online Discussion Room

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[Abstract] This article examines the influence of Psychodynamics on the online course room. The virtual discussion room is a cornerstone of the distance learning experience. Participants engage in virtual dialogue and discussion requiring their construction of learning environments that are academically stimulating and educationally rewarding within an academic community that is sensory-limited and geographically disparate. Thus, examining the key psychological and select theories and applications from the sociological and anthropological literature, may contribute to current research associated with the online discussion room and advance the efficacy of educators' instructional practice. This paper explores four (4) areas that may influence the online discussion room; they are; 1) Psychodynamics: Origins and Organizing, 2) Psychodynamic Structures and Conditions, 3) Language, Symbols, and Social Construction, and 4) The Online Discussion Room: Internal Integration Considerations.

[Keyword] online discussion room, psychodynamics, symbols, and social construction

The 21st higher education market is like no other in educational history. Institutions of all types are being called upon to operate in increasingly complex environments characterized by the relevance of higher education to workforce readiness, shifting governmental policies associated with student funding, and an overall decrease in institutional enrollment. These environmental conditions, exacerbated by the deleterious impact of the COV-19 pandemic, are challenging higher education leaders to reexamine their educational orientations and instructional practices associated with distance education and student learning. Curtain (2021) writes, "While the response of higher education institutions to the pandemic should be applauded, the work is just beginning. The rapid shift to remote learning was a powerful start, but over the past year, we've learned that solely hosting lectures as online meetings is leaving some students behind and leaving many yearning for the rich campus experiences that fostered learning in and out of the classroom" (p.1).

Within this context of the "work is just beginning" associated with remote learning, it is critical to recognize that educators and students alike have been thrust into an unfamiliar educational landscape and forced to adapt immediately. As a result, educators rapidly transitioned their course materials and instructional methods to distance-learning platforms. This migration's immediacy prompted wholesale reengineering of course designs and syllabi, restructuring content archives, and real-time experimentation with ways of teaching and learning. A critical instructional consideration was creating a virtual space replicating or approximating the cornerstone classroom learning activities of dialogue and discussion. Carey (2020) offers, "There was an overnight shift of normal classrooms into e-classrooms; that is, educators had to shift their entire pedagogical approach to tackle new market conditions and adapt to the changing situations (p. 1). As a result of this behemothian transition, Dhawan (2020) noted, "Online learning is emerging as a *victrix (victor) ludorum* amidst this chaos" (p. 1).

As chaos from the pandemic dissipates and the global higher education community transitions toward the Post COV-19 environment, a new order of online teaching and learning appears emergent. Therefore, it is essential to identify actual and perceived changes in instruction that may result from the pandemic.

Recognizing that research focused on the Psychodynamics of the online discussion room was nascent before the pandemic, the focus of this article is to contribute to current research associated with the online discussion room and advance the efficacy of educators' instructional practice.

Psychodynamics: Origins and Organizing

The psychodynamics mechanisms influencing human interaction in the online classroom originated in the early psychoanalytic theoretical and clinical work of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Over the decades, multiple definitions of Psychodynamics have been formulated. Bornstein's (2008) contribution indicates "psychodynamic theory (sometimes called psychoanalytic theory) explains personality in terms of unconscious psychological processes and contends that childhood experiences are crucial in shaping adult personality exploring unconscious thoughts and emotions so that the person is better able to understand him - or herself." Both unconscious and conscious psychological processes and childhood experiences shaping adult personality may not be readily apparent as students engage in online discussion. However, being aware of the cognitive schemas and structures present exerting influence during dialogue and discussion could prove helpful as educators construct learning frameworks and strategies for identifying and deciphering the multilevel communications occurring within a sensory limited learning environment. Bailenson and Yee (2008) offer a framework assessing the relationship between psychology and communications titled the *Human Cognitive Architecture (HCA)*. The authors posit that the HCA framework is "helpful in discussing how different types of thought and corresponding areas of psychology relate to each other along a continuum, and how this continuum, in turn, [influences] communications" (p. 3).

The HCA model is the creation of Alan Newell, one of the co-founders of artificial intelligence. Newel's seminal work *Unified Theories of Cognition* (1990) established a hierarchical structure based on the processing time associated with organizing different types of human behaviors (Bailenson & Yee, p. 3). Newel (1990) indicated that the sequence of cognition relative to behavior is a *bottom-up* process. He posited that the sequence began with biological events (e.g., neurons firing), then combined with cognitive actions (e.g., memory retrieval), then joined with rational action (e.g., problem-solving), and finally was incorporated into social action (e.g., culture formation) (Bailenson & Yee, p. 3). Newel (1990) indicated that this schema of sequenced actions forms an "evolutionary level" in which the "mind, body, and behavior of a species will change over specific time intervals" (Bailenson & Yee, pp. 3932-3933).

Newel's (1990) foundational hypothesis is that the "lower level to higher level" directionality of cognition culminates in "making decisions, forming social impressions, and communicating." (Bailenson & Yee, pp. 3932-3933). Thus, the HCA's structural approach to communications is essential for communication and learning in general and may apply to the online discussion room. The HCA draws primarily from experimental psychology, collecting empirical data associated with thought and behavior (e.g., cognitive psychology) that explore the relationships between psychology and communication. Also, the HCA offers an opposing theoretical frame for comparison to and integration with psychodynamic theories and applications.

Alternatives to the *bottom-up* approach are found in the non-experimental methods used in other fields of psychology. However, these research methods suggest a *top-down* approach to exploring the relationships between psychology and communications, for example, the case study method. Bailenson and Yee (2008) indicate one of the earliest and perhaps most controversial theories [approaches] is Psychodynamics. The authors offer, "Psychodynamics posits that significant part of our emotional and motivational forces operation at a subconscious level and are strongly influenced by early childhood experiences and development (p. 3). Freud used the case study and other non-experimental methods to analyze the patient's psychological conditions. Thus, the psychodynamic become an essential mechanism for exploring psychological disorders facilitated through the relationship between psychology and communications (i.e., free association). Shukla (2020) offer that the psychodynamic approach includes all

the theories in psychology that see human functioning based upon the interaction of drives and forces within the person, particularly unconscious, and between the different structures of the personality.

Online education reflects an evolving multi-variant learning environment rife with pedagogical and andragogical theories, models, and tools. In aggregate, they appear convergent focused on producing valid and reliable mechanisms for teaching and learning via distance learning. This confluence of multiple theoretical and applied approaches seems to have enlivened this previously *outlier* educational practice. Whether traditional land-based or progressive online education, classroom-based dialogue and discussion remain a core educating activity. They promote knowledge acquisition, interpersonal communications, and reflective capacities promoting personal and professional growth. Students bring and invest their psychodynamic portfolio of orientations, behaviors, and experiences into the sensory limited online discussion room.

The online discussion room is largely uncharted. Therefore, using a psychodynamic approach to exploring psychological and communication structures influencing interaction in the online discussion room may be an informative and useful investigation of this topic. Also, considering mental models such as the HCA model and select theories from the sociological and anthropological literature may contribute to current research associated with the online discussion room and advance the efficacy of educators' instructional practice.

This paper explores four (4) areas that may influence the online discussion room; they are; 1) Psychodynamics: Origins and Organizing, 2) Psychodynamic Structures and Conditions, 3) Language, Symbols, and Social Construction, and 4) The Online Discussion Room: Internal Integration Considerations.

Psychodynamic Structures and Conditions

Freud (1911, 1915, 1923) presented his theoretical map of different systems of the mind - *Topography of the Mind*. He identified a three-tier structure with initial attributions to the purpose and function of each structure. Freud posited that the "mental apparatus can be broadly understood in terms of three mental systems: unconscious, preconscious, and conscious" Bornstein's (2008), (p. 2). This topography evolved into his model of personality, including the Superego, Ego, and Id. Both the *Topography of the Mind* and the model of personality provide essential theoretical frames for identifying the power and potential influence inherent in these psychodynamic structures that students bring to the online discussion room.

Freud's mental schema viewed the Superego as framing the moral and ethical consciousness generating value-driven thoughts and behaviors. The Ego, the conscious mind, managed the executive functions of living, and the Id comprised of instincts and drives is timeless, structureless, and chaotic. The online discussion room occurs in a limited sensory environment requiring participants to interact and learn in a virtual learning environment. This environment, governed by the reduction of student access to the five senses, provides unique challenges to learning through interacting. Moser and Williams (2021) offer, "The convergence of altered course room conditions, thematically fragment communication, episodic emphasis on group learning, and the absence of substantive relationship-building enabled by sensory-based interaction can inhibit student engagement in the online discussion room" (p. 3). Schein (2010) writes that altered organization, working, and learning conditions can hinder learning and performance as expressed through "disconfirmation, learning anxiety, and survival anxiety."

Louwrens and Hartnett (2015) consider "Differences between online and face-to-face students notwithstanding, a range of factors that support student engagement in online contexts including; social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence" (p. 20). These critical absences can exacerbate the significantly limited sensory environment, in turn, student's communicative capabilities. Compounding these conditions, DiMaggio et al. (2004) write, "Digital inequality research suggests that people vary in their quality of Internet access and skills, which then may influence the benefits they can reap from

communication technologies" (p. 4). Together, limited sensory stimulation and potential digital inequity create a platform for inhibiting participant engagement in the online discussion room that could psychodynamically stimulate the Superego, Ego, and Id in ways that may impede learning.

An emerging concern associated with the Psychodynamics in the discussion room is participant isolation. Croft, et al. (2010) offer, "The physical and temporal separation of tutor and student, and between students themselves, can lead to feelings of isolation. Furthermore, the lack of interaction and discussion between students in non-cohort-based courses lessens the richness of the learning experience and omits a significant element of the constructivist approach to learning" (p. 1). Isolation may result from the lack of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Louwrens & Hartnett, 2015). For example, in the online discussion room, students are engaged visually through writing. The absence of engaging all the senses in learning could then result in feelings of isolation. Stodel et al. (2006) indicate that "Isolation can be understood in terms of such dimensions such as time, space, social (awareness of others), intellectual and professional experience and expertise, [technology], sensory (ability to see/feel/hear peers); cultural; and subject [matter]." Venter (2003) and Lake (1999) assert that "Reassurance and peer contact, as well as appropriate support, are required to overcome this isolation."

A critical concern resulting from isolation is that this state can stimulate negative and unproductive thoughts and actions. Potentially, the Superego, Ego, and Id, could flood students with counterproductive messaging fueling discussion room disengagement. For example, the Superego may frame *This class should not be offered via distance learning; therefore, I will not participate*. The Ego, to protect the self, in turn, could curb participation through offering *I think the academic level of the class participants is low, so I will not engage in the discussion room*. Lastly, the Id may emerge with messaging such as *This course is a disaster, I never liked school, and I am terrified of communicating in the distance learning virtual unknown with unknowns*. Moser and Williams (2021) theorize that "While there are similarities between ground-based and online discussion room learning activities, online discussion rooms often create *domains of silence*. These *domains* are characterized by episodic participation, increasingly thematically fragmented responses and messaging, and little to no engagement with organized learner groups" (p. 4). If present in the distance learning discussion room, *domains of silence* can severely undermine the education benefits from dialogue and discussion, rendering this primary communication platform mute.

Encouraging student participation in online discussions through an awareness of the psychodynamic and associated influences present may help reduce interaction and learning while decreasing isolation.

Language, Symbols, and Social Construction

Humans are the only species that can think symbolically. Deacon (1997) argues that "the emergence of symbolic capacities unique to language was a key factor in the evolution of the human brain, and are a key to distinguishing human from animal forms of communication, ways of learning and brain structures." Through human development, our cognitive capabilities evolve, enabling us to think symbolically and abstractly. Cherry (2021) indicates, "Abstract reasoning or abstract thinking involves the ability to understand and think with complex concepts that, while real, are not tied to concrete experiences, objects, people, or situations. This type of reasoning involves thinking about ideas and principles that are often symbolic or hypothetical" (pp. 1-2). Symbolic thinking employs symbols, artifacts, ideas, and representations that substitute for something else. In the online discussion room, language is the primary interactive currency enabling dialogue and discussion. As distance learning expands and enrollments increase, symbolic communication via literal and figurative language will expand and diversify, providing futile ground for discourse while challenging all participants to develop their capacities to use these languages to learn effectively.

Languages, Metaphors, Symbols, Social Constructionism

The Stoic Philosopher Epictetus wrote that *Man is not worried by real problems because of his imagined anxieties about real problems*. The online discussion room can be viewed as problematic and learning limiting. A core criticism of distance education is that it is sensory limited. Writing via posts is the primary communication currency in the online discussion room. While perhaps limiting, this condition offers opportunities to improve writing-related skills continually. Figurative and literal language are two key languages used in language analysis. Literal language is an exact representation of something. Literal language illustrates and describes "what is" and neither requires interpretation nor is enhanced through broader expressions of abstractions and conceptual thought.

Conversely, figurative language employs various literary devices to improve expression and articulation and requires higher-level thinking skills. Figurative language enables robust and vibrant communication possibilities. It employs literary devices including metaphor and simile to frame and infuse dialogue and discussion. In the online discussion room, both literal and figurative languages are necessary for dialogue and discussion. However, in the context of its limited sensory environment, encouraging the use of figurative language could be an animating agent of discourse, producing dynamic and stimulating written language usage experiences. Forstall (2019) writes figurative language tends to be more complex and is not always very straightforward. Figurative language often uses symbolism, requiring the reader or listener to think beyond the words that are written [literal language] using literary devices [such as metaphor] instead of relying on the actual meaning of words or phrases."

Metaphors

One figurative language device is a metaphor. Bishara and Kaplin (2016) indicate that writing engagingly and expressively requires understanding and using figurative language, especially metaphor reflecting the cognitive level, level of creativity, and capacity for abstract thinking. Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset mused, "The metaphor is perhaps one of man's most fruitful potentialities. Its efficacy verges on magic." In the online discussion room, participants using metaphors in writing posts can stimulate their own and others' thinking resulting in greater creativity, insight and improve writing skills. Metaphors are symbolic expressions. "Symbolism is the practice or art of using an object or a word to represent an abstract idea. An action, person, place, word, or object can all have a symbolic meaning" (Your Dictionary, p. 1). For example, the online discussion room could be represented by stating, *The online discussion room is like a beehive full of informed activity, constant communication through discussion, sense-making, and construction of meaning*. A second metaphor might be *dialogue and discussion in the online discussion room is like an ocean of ideas, a vast expanse of diverse species of ideas, thematic connectivity, and personal and professional transformation*. Students using metaphor in posting stimulates the mental structures framed by Freud. Metaphors provide opportunities to positively and negatively present discussion room topics powerfully and potently.

Lumby and English (2010) write, "language [figurative language] is the ultimate form of the construction of symbolic power; it stirs humanity to manage change. The essence of language for leaders is the use of metaphors" (p. 2)." Substituting student and teacher for leader, as teachers lead and students engage in education, the power and potential inherent in using metaphors to promote dialogue and discussion in the online discussion room is evident. Psychodynamically, Marshall (1999) states, "Metaphors reveal insights to what we think or feel by creating a bridge between the unconscious and conscious" (p. 4).

Literal and figurative languages and devices such as metaphor offer students and instructors tools for co-creating joint constructs of meaning through symbols in the online discussion room. Through discussion room interaction, participants socially construct their learning space.

Symbolism and Social Construction

In the seminal work of Berger and Luckmann (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, the authors state, language shapes the social world. It constructs identities and social relations and helps in understanding the world. Therefore, language is a dynamic form of social practice. Figurative language is symbolic with language presenting abstractions and ideas through symbols. Fernback (2019) asserts that "humans interpret and assign meaning to events via an elaborate set of symbols. The meanings of these symbols originate and evolve through human social interaction. These interactions form the foundation for people's notions of self and society. Thus, the material world, as well as concepts of self, is constructed through an interactive, communicative process" (p. 24).

Symbols are symbolic; they stand in for another thing. As such, individuals make them meaningful, infusing them with the power to influence how we think and behave. Symbolizing is a consolidating function as it enables us to construct order and create priorities while decreasing chaos and unknowingness. Higher education generally and distance education specifically is rich in symbols. Colleges and universities use symbols and artifacts that uniquely represent vital structural elements such as mottos, rituals, legacies, and cultural context. In concert, these symbolrich educational environments present integrated and complex institutional and cultural tapestries informing external and internal stakeholders of the mission, values, and practices that guide teaching and learning. Lueger and Vettori (2014) write, "Higher education is positively imbued with social meaning. Every academic ritual, scientific routine or scholarly practice carries meanings that go far beyond the situational motives of the actors themselves." Thus, higher education is a symbol of society.

Distance education has been portrayed using a mixture of positive and negative symbols associated with value and quality. Fain (2019) wrote, "Online education has not lived up to its potential [and] fully online course work contributes to socioeconomic and racial achievement gaps while failing to be more affordable than traditional courses. Faculty, academic leaders, the public, and employers continue to perceive online degrees less favorably than traditional degrees, p. 23)." This messaging can be condensed into symbols and figurative language, encapsulating and presenting complex concepts for more efficient conscience and unconscious acquisition. In distance education, institutions may adopt symbols such as crests, colors, and artifacts associated with traditional academe to present themselves similarly to established and credible higher education institutions to minimize the potentially harmful effects fueled by negative symbology.

Social Constructionism

The online discussion room is a virtual learning space framed with prescribed guidelines for learning and interaction. Course syllabi dictate assignments, rules for engagement, and requirements of comportment. As participants interact and relations form in the online discussion room, symbolic systems fueled by joint constructs of meaning emerge. Berger and Luckmann's (1966) seminal work theorized the basic tenet that people "make their social and cultural worlds at the same time these worlds make them" (p. 10). If so, participation in the online discussion room is a process of social construction and meaning creation. These constructions occur over time, a single or multiple semesters, and jointly through dialogue and discussion, participants construct, deconstruct, and create new cognitions, concepts, and actions. When positively reinforced, these activities can become habitual, resulting in discussion room common languages, group boundaries, and relationship building.

The Online Discussion Room: Internal Integration Considerations

The online discussion room is socially constructed with organizing principles and guidelines for comportment. It reflects characteristics and behaviors associated with organizational design and behavior literature and practices especially related to group dynamics, communications, and governance. The work

of social psychologist Dr. Edgar Schein is relevant to understanding the psychodynamic forces and associated emergent structures influencing the cultural evolution of the online discussion room. Schein's seminal work *Organizational Culture and Leadership* (1985, 2010) and later work *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide* (1999, 2009) provide detailed theories, strategies, and methods for culture construction. When cultivating and managing cultural evolution, specifically the internal integration of organizations, Schein writes, "If a group is to accomplish tasks that enable it to adapt to the external environment, it must be able to develop and maintain a set of internal relationships among its members." Likening the student engagement in the online discussion room to group accomplishment (i.e., assigned discussions) and adapting externally (i.e., applying learnings to external goals and actions) relationship development and building joint constructs of meaning is essential to culture construction.

Schein (2010) identifies six processes that "allow a group to internally integrate itself [and reflect the major internal issues [i.e., learning tasks] that the group must deal with" to communicate and be productive collectively" (pp. 71-84). Four of the six processes seem especially relevant in tracing the construction and evolution of the online discussion room, they are; 1) creating a common language and conceptual categories, 2) defining group boundaries and criteria for inclusion and exclusion, 3) how relationships are defined, and 4) defining and allocating rewards and punishments.

These four processes will be briefly explored, and developmental stages posited indicating possible discussion room participant conditions and actions stratified in a three-level schema: beginning, gestational, and mature.

Creating a Common Language and Conceptual Categories

Common language and ways of thinking are influential cultural symbols. They serve as powerful indicators of directionality, ways to interact, cultivate community, and succeed. Schein (2010) offers, "To function as a group, the individuals who come together must establish a system of communication and a language that permits interpretation of what is going on" (p. 71). While students primarily engage in higher education for personal and professional growth, not to work collectively, working as a group becomes a critical dimension of the educational experience. For example, group assignments and collaborative projects are frequent learning experiences in distance education. Class members must develop languages and conceptual categories of *ways to work* successfully for individual and group engagement. Thus, applying the three-level schema to the online discussion room.

- Beginning - Learning course room emergent language textual inferences from posts mapping and codifying the initial meaning and intent of participant interaction and instructor expectations
- Gestational - Processing toward understanding direct and indirect messaging and meaning through literal and figurative languages, increasingly productive dialogue and discussion, and engaging joint construction of meaning.
- Mature - Skimming participant communications identifying symbols, themes, keywords, and phrases aligned with resident languages and concepts, expanding conceptual categorization and archives. Significant interaction with sub-groups sharing similar psychodynamic, personal, and professional orientations.

Schein (2010) writes, "The human organism cannot tolerate too much uncertain and/or stimuli overload" (pp. 71-75). Through cultivating common language and conceptual categories in the online discussion room, participants can promote individual and group learning and growth to diminish dysfunctional behaviors.

Defining Group Boundaries and Criteria for Inclusion and Exclusion

In James Horner's novel *Legends of the Fall*, the story's narrator, One Stab, partially frames the main character Tristan as "*the rock they broke themselves against.*" This symbolic representation can be used

metaphorically with the boundaries and criteria for inclusion and exclusion in the online discussion room. For example, students in degree programs often study as a cohort or are frequently scheduled together in the same course section. As a result, participants build socially constructed relationships through shared beliefs, concepts, and language. Through the quality and length of these relationships, classrooms develop groups and sub-groups framed by explicit or implicit criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Schein (2010) indicates that "If a group is to function and develop, [its members] must determine criteria and consensus of *who is and who is out*" (p. 43). By defining group boundaries, the online discussion room organizes, acquires an identity, and provides or denies group access. Levine and Hogg (2009) report, "Group boundaries are used to determine who is included in a specific group and who is not. Group boundaries play a central role in human perceptions and behaviors. They are often defined in a *metaphoric or symbolic way* enabling individuals to experience a psychological sense of inclusion or exclusion relative to a group" (pp. 25-27). Thus, applying the three-level schema to the online discussion room.

- Beginning - Testing the discussion room's conditions, access, resistance, and constraints and identifying explicit or implicit evidence of acceptance and rejection from students and instructors.
- Gestational - Group decisions providing membership or not to other participants predicated either a continuum of established relationships or favorable first-time impressions associated with communications and behavior trends.
- Mature - Malleable group boundaries and inclusion criteria that value and supports diversity, inclusion, and equity and reduces all forms of discussion room exclusion.

Schein (2010) concludes that the process of determining group members forces decision and action, resulting in group boundaries "promoting group identity, the potential of shared resources, and survival.

How Relationships Are Defined

Freud (1856-1939) indicated that individuals' essential life model they bring to new group settings is their family systems model. Bowen (1913-1990) advanced Freud's orientations concerning the nature of families and their relationships, summarized by MacKay and Brown (2014) "Bowen's focus was on patterns that develop in families to defuse anxiety. For example, the concepts of too much distance or closeness generate significant anxiety" (p. 1). As a result, the guidelines and behaviors that influence individuals' orientations acting toward parents, siblings, and others will be highly differentiated. Hence, viewing the online discussion room in terms of family systems models offers a function approach in understanding the Psychodynamics inherent in group formulation and engagement. Defining relations within the online discussion room evolves through interaction and longevity. Schein (2010) determined that in each organization or self-organizing setting, "each organization develop its own cultural assumptions about the degree to which [participants] are expected to become close to each other" (pp. 82-85).

Thus, applying the three-level schema to the online discussion room.

- Beginning - Introducing, replicating, or mutating family systems materials, including the guidelines for closeness, friendship, degrees of intimacy, and authority and power to test sameness, conflict, and anxiety generation.
- Gestational - Groups and subgroups, including the instructor sharing insights, gossip, and secret information predicated on increasing degrees of trust and intimacy.
- Mature - Relationship development exceeding or expanding group boundaries, engaging the Superego, Ego, and Id deeper personal relationship, and fostering behaviors fueled by personal values such as loyalty, commitment, and protection.

Schein (2010) writes, "Organizations differ in the assumptions they make about authority relationships and the degree of intimacy that is considered appropriate among members" (p. 83). Substituting students for organizations, participants in the online discussion room enter a virtual world

with limited sensory stimuli engaging spatially distributed participants. These conditions may be foreign to the family-based experiences associated with our stages of development and priori expectations of interacting, working, and learning with others. As a result, what is known becomes unknown framed by Nelson (2020), "making the familiar strange" (p. 1).

Defining and Allocating Rewards and Punishments

Groups develop systems of rewards and punishments to reinforce group boundaries and manage engagement and behavior. Schein (2009) writes, "There must evolve some consensus on what symbolically and actually is defined as a reward or punishment and on the manner in which they are administered." Online discussion room participants, especially new students, need to understand which socially constructed behaviors are acceptable and not. "Newcomers need to know when they are doing the right or wrong thing" (Schein, 2010, p. 47). Typically, in educational settings, rewards and punishments are considered the domain of the instructor. However, participants develop and apply cultural alignment mechanisms to ensure cultural compliance. Through deploying formulations of group-developed common language, inclusion and exclusion criteria, and guidelines for defining and developing relationships, discussion room participants evolve a socially constructed framework of explicit and implicit reward and punishment practices. For example, a student could be isolated from the group by individuals or en masse by not responding to initial and secondary posts or boycotting discussion room engagement altogether. Or, discussion room participants could engage in private messaging, maligning a student's intellectual capabilities and writing skills, resulting in diminished respect and likability for the student, further ostracism from the group. Thus, applying the three-level schema to the online discussion room.

- Beginning - Participant discussion room response to everyone providing reward-rich posts offering encouragement and praise for others contributions. Conversely, instructor statements using literal language articulating the rewards and punishments for noncompliance with assignment submission dates in the syllabus.
- Gestational - An instructor dialoguing with students requesting ideas for additional and alternative rewards for superior performance (i.e., not taking the course final exam or extra credit exams for 100% class attendance). Conversely, a sub-group is constructing a plan to harass a culturally non-compliant, encouraging them to leave the course.
- Mature - Legacy practices of multiple and alternative reward systems recognize the superior treatment of course content, quality of discussion, and innovation of existing reward systems. Conversely, rigid discussion room culture fomenting group boundaries that resist and stymie instructor efforts to teach.

Closing

At the Lord Mayor's Luncheon, Mansion House in November 1942, Sir Winston Churchill informed the House of Commons about the shifting direction of the military operations "This not the end. It is not even the beginning of the end. But it is, perhaps, the end of the beginning." Within this context of "the end of the beginning" fueled this initial exploration of the psychodynamic of the online discussion room. The online discussion room is gravid with the promise of transformational growth for students and teachers. Harnessing the educational power and potential inherent in the online discussion room offers fertile content for continuous scholarship and applied research.

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