

Learning to work virtually: Conversational repair as a resource for norm development in computer-mediated team meetings.

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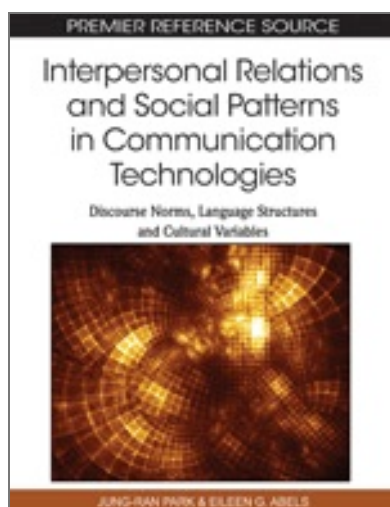


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Learning to Work Virtually: Conversational Repair as a Resource for Norm Development in Computer-Mediated Team Meetings

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Abstract

This chapter presents an analysis of interaction in computer-mediated group meetings. Five undergraduate students used a quasi-synchronous chat interface to conduct four virtual team meetings. Using the framework of conversation analysis, I describe how self-initiated self repair of minor errors such as typos was used by team members as a vehicle for group norm development. The norms for typing style (punctuation, correcting typos and spelling mistakes) vary widely across computer-mediated communication (CMC) contexts. I show how the main function of the repair attempts was not to clarify meaning, but rather to help team members, particularly in their first meeting, work out an agreed-upon set of typing conventions for their subsequent interactions, thus contributing to the development of a norm of informality.

Chapter Preview

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Introduction

Scholars in a variety of fields, including organizational communication, management, and educational technology, have sought to better understand the obstacles to computer-mediated collaboration and teamwork, and to explain how virtual groups can be used effectively in a variety of contexts. Often this scholarship focuses, directly or indirectly, on the communicative practices of computer-mediated groups, and how these practices relate to factors such as trust, interaction style, conflict management, leadership, relationship building, etc. For example, research has found that computer-mediated communication (CMC) does not present a de facto obstacle to successful group problem solving, and that groups can and do

compensate for any limitations imposed by the medium (Potter & Balthazard, 2002). The style of interaction that the group as a whole exhibits, as opposed to the personalities of the individual team members, can predict contextual outcomes in virtual teams (Balthazard, Potter, & Warren, 2004). Positive outcomes in virtual teamwork have also been linked to the presence or development of shared understanding among team members (Majchrzak, Rice, King, Malhotra, & Ba, 2000), as have listening and paying attention (Furst, Blackburn, & Rosen, 1999). Additional research has shown that effective virtual teams are able to fit their communication patterns to the task (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). As a whole, this scholarship points to the need for further examinations of specific communicative practices, particularly as they relate to the development of virtual groups and teams.

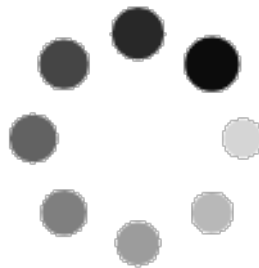
This chapter expands the research on computer-mediated group development by taking a different approach, focusing specifically on *how* conversation in virtual team meetings unfolds. I draw on the methodological tools of conversation analysis (CA) (e.g. Heritage, 1984; Silverman, 1998) to demonstrate empirically how conversational repair can be used as a tool for the development of group norms (Tuckman, 1965). In this context, repair refers to occasions when participants stop the ongoing trajectory of talk to fix troubles in their own or in another participant's prior turn. Within research on spoken interaction, repair has been shown to be evidence of how participants in conversation achieve intersubjective understanding (Schegloff, 1992, 2000). However, in this chapter I will show that repair can be used for more than fixing misunderstandings, and that, in the course of virtual meetings, it can serve as a resource for team members to test the boundaries of their interaction style.

I begin with a short discussion of norms and computer-mediated group development, followed by a brief review of research on repair in spoken and computer-mediated interaction. I will then present data drawn from a larger case study of conversational structures in virtual team meetings and show how repair is used as a tool during the norming process. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this research for the study of virtual groups and suggestions for future research directions.

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