

Of Conflict in Virtual Learning Communities in the Context of a Democratic Pedagogy: A paradox or sophism?¹

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Abstract

Conflict is a dynamic and complex concept which takes a crucial part in students' learning experiences, especially in learning communities underpinned with democratic pedagogy. Democratic pedagogies provide a base for emancipatory education by enabling students to participate in governance of their learning processes and so take responsibility for their own learning. In VLCs underpinned with democratic pedagogy, the method and content of the learning programme are not tightly structured in order to fulfil the community members' wishes, interests, ideas and so on, throughout the learning process. Within this framework, emergence of conflict among the community members is inevitable, given the diverse and sometimes clashing individual differences in participation in the negotiation process; in the loose structure of the programme which brings about uncertainty; and in the nature of the technological environments in which learning takes place. Once conflict emerges, it may lead to either an enjoyable or an unpleasant learning experience for students.

To surface the conflict in the learning process, a case study was conducted with third-year undergraduate students enrolled in a Computer Education and Instructional Technology programme in Turkey, during one academic term. In order to investigate students' experience with conflict in the context of democratic pedagogy, two learning groups were chosen: while the first group members did not perceive conflict, the second group members did experience severe conflict. By presenting these two contrasting groups' cases, it is aimed to exhibit the members' learning with and without conflict, and thereby to surface the importance of conflict in learning. Drawing on the findings, the dynamics and the roles of conflict in learning were discussed. The findings demonstrate the importance of taking a holistic, processual view of the emergence of conflict in a learning community.

Keywords

Conflict, virtual learning communities, learning experience, democratic pedagogies

Introduction

Conflict refers to the perceived overt or hidden events which are generated from differences among a group of people, that are triggered by conflict dynamics and which have a role in the social learning process. When people work together towards the same goal, as they usually come together in different relationships and from different conditions of life, they are apt to generate diverse realities, logic patterns and values (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). The differences among the people in a community are a key issue in the emergence of conflict.

¹ This paper has been written, based on a chapter in a PhD thesis (Ozturk, 2011). In the thesis, a model of conflict was developed (Figure 1) and conflict is dealt with from *the individual, group and socio-economical* perspectives. In this paper, conflict experienced in the *learning groups* is the main focus and examined through the dynamics and results of the conflict.

However, it is important to note that having differences in the community does not necessarily mean that an individual/group/community experiences conflict as they may not even notice the differences they have. It is the internal dynamics that make the differences in the matter of conflict or avoidance of conflict. If, for instance, the character of the group's learning culture accommodates the differences, then the emergence of conflict can be avoided. On the other hand, if, for instance, the members propose opposing arguments in the process of knowledge production, and if the members feel anxious about the approaching deadline, conflict among them may be triggered by ontological insecurity as an internal dynamic and may lead to the emergence of conflict. Very briefly, in this research, the internal dynamics of conflict are classified as triggers and avoidance of conflict which are identified as group size, ontological security, learning culture, distribution of power and technological factors (Ozturk, 2011).

So, to what extent might conflict have a role in learning? In the literature (Clouder et al, 2006; Folger et al, 1997; Kuhn & Poole, 2002; Tartas and Mirza, 2007; Stegmann et al, 2007; Passos & Caetano, 2005; Pandy, 1967), there are two contrasting views about the role of conflict in learning; while one view posits the positive role of conflict in learning, the other view emphasises its negative role. In this research, a neutral approach is taken to conflict in order to explore the concept openly and thereby avoid prior bias. In general, conflict has the potential to result in resolution, compliance, fragmentation and drop-outs; and possible outcomes of conflict in learning can be about learning orientation of the students, participation in collaborative-cooperative learning and chaos (Ozturk, 2011).

In the light of the discussions above, it is aimed to examine how in practice conflict emerges and is experienced by the students in virtual learning communities in the context of democratic pedagogy.

Method

A case study approach was adopted in this research. Briefly, a research site was chosen from an ongoing third-year undergraduate programme in Turkey. The study was conducted during one academic term (14 weeks) in a course titled 'Distance Education'.

A group project was given to the students, aiming to provide students with an insight into global issues in Distance Education. As a method of achieving this aim, students were provided with resources, as well as guidance when they needed it, and they were independent in the matters of obtaining, using and constructing knowledge and presenting their findings to the whole community. A very general aim was to introduce students to the different countries' distance education theories and practices and furthermore to examine how globally distance education has brought about changes in education. Since the topic was about Global perspective and practices, each group picked one of the 7 Continents and then presented their findings to the community. Activities, such as choosing which continent to focus on and task allocation within the group, took place on Moodle.

The coding process in this research was informed by constructivist grounded theory. A coding schema was formed, drawing on literature and the data from the study. Data was coded line by line and constant comparison was made.

Data Collection Tools

At the beginning of the research, provisional research questions were formed in order to guide the data collection. Data sources comprised of a/synchronous communications, transcripts from the focus groups, interviews, pre-& post-course questionnaires and email correspondence. As the participants' main language is Turkish, the quotations in this research are translated into English.

Focus groups were conducted with the students to capture interaction among members, and heated discussions emerged from this social interaction, which in turn enabled us to examine interpersonal sites of conflict. Pre-& Post-questionnaires were used in order to collect data about intrapersonal sites of conflict by addressing individual questions. These questionnaires were delivered before and after the course which enabled us to see the emergence and development of conflict throughout the course. For instance, in the pre-course questionnaire, as an intrapersonal conflict type, students were asked for their working preferences (e.g. whether they prefer to

work in a group or individually). In the post-course questionnaire, similar questions were asked, but they were requested to give answers based on their experience in the course (e.g. they were asked to state their working preference, which might signify an intrapersonal conflict, drawing on their group experience in the course). The changes in their answers were helpful in hinting at a possible conflict.

Discussions: Exploring inter/intrapersonal conflict through the student members' learning community experience

This research deals with how conflict influences the way student groups learn. In order to investigate this, two learning groups were chosen: while the first group members did not perceive conflict, the second group members experienced severe conflict. By presenting these two contrasting groups' cases, it is aimed to exhibit the members' learning with and without conflict and from this surface the importance of conflict in learning.

A further point concerns the sites of conflict which are divided into 3 categories (Ozturk, 2011): (1) Intrapersonal sites of conflict (an individual with his/her personal values which are in conflict with the others such as interest, wish, ethnographic characteristics, expectation, working preferences), (2) Interpersonal sites of conflict (explicitly emerging during social interactions such as argument-counter argument, power relationships, affiliation), (3) conflict in socio-cultural values (the societal values which constitute members' biographies as an important element in socially constructivist learning environments and the educational system of a society as well as educational paradigms which constitute the foundations of the education system). This paper deals with intra/interpersonal conflict types, as it is aimed at viewing the conflict from an individual and group perspectives. Socio-cultural conflict signifies societal values which is not in the scope of this study.

Finally, among a variety of *conflict types*, *dynamics* and *outcomes of conflict*, each group exhibits a different pattern, namely a commonly shared characteristic of conflict. The density of the grounded categories in each group's data enabled us to capture the conflict patterns, and as a result of these patterns, we could examine how these two groups experienced different conflict processes (a. conflict type (intra/interpersonal conflict) b. dynamics of conflict and c. influence of conflict in their learning). In the sections below, firstly conflict patterns of each group will be demonstrated, then these patterns will be extrapolated in each group's stories with conflict.

GROUP I

This group dealt with the topic of Distance Education in Europe and finalized their project on the 8th week of the course. The group consisted of 3 male and 3 female students. The group members were coded as Subjects 1,2,3, 4, 5& 6.

1.1. Conflict Patterns

Conflict Types : No perception of conflict

Dynamics of conflict : Learning culture

Outcome of (non/perception of) conflict in group's learning: Intended knowledge production, Orientation

1.2 Intrapersonal Conflict

Intrapersonal conflict did not play an important part in the group's learning experience. In the post-course questionnaires, most of the students (4 out of 6) referred to the commonality of their individual values. For instance, Subject 5 says: "There were many things in common. Differences did not influence [us] very much"

On examining the dynamics which might have avoided the generation of conflict, the group's accommodating learning culture stands out. For instance, Subject 4 says, "We benefited from the differences". Also, the other members (e.g. Subject 3 and 5) did not perceive these differences as a matter for conflict, which means that, for the majority of the group, the differences did not turn out as conflict.

However, there are two members (Subject 1 and Subject 6) in this group who explicitly encountered intrapersonal conflict. First of all, Subject 1's working preference was in conflict, as in both the pre-course and post-course questionnaires she preferred to work individually, whereas she needed to get involved in group work during the course. With regard to this, she states in the post-course questionnaire that: "Some of our friends preferred not to join the discussions and sneak away" and she adds: "I don't like group work; working

individually is for me". It is understood, both from her persistent choice in the pre- & post-course questionnaire concerning her preference for individual work and from her comment about her group experience in the post-course questionnaire, that she experienced conflict in her working preference. Here, underpinning the values of VLCs stands paradoxical in the sense that participatory pedagogy may also mean that the students are unwilling to participate, leading to the emergence of conflict.

Secondly, in the post-course questionnaire, although Subject 1 admits that there had been many individual values in common, she points out that this was not the case for all group members, and she experienced a conflict of interests; consequently she became bored while working. Her interest, which conflicts with those of other members, raises the question of idealised democratic learning communities which put forward 'communality' among members. In other words, while shared values leverage community spirit, it raises the question of conflict in cases in which members put forward interests which are not precisely aligned with the interests of the others.

As for Subject 6, she writes in the post-course questionnaire:

"If I choose my group mates, then we have something in common. If the tutors choose [the group members that I am supposed to work with] in accordance with the attendance sheet, then I never find anything in common, because I am with the students that I never get on with very well. And this situation definitely impacts my learning process".

It was concluded from her statement that the historicity element stands out in her learning experience. As Schwier (2001) points out, VLC members live in history, consisting of past, present and future, which makes members' engagement more meaningful or vice versa. This sort of historical relationships can be interpreted in two ways: both as a trigger of conflict and an avoidance of [interpersonal] conflict. In this example, the state of having an unpleasant relationship in history triggers the conflict. So, interpretation of conflict in VLCs requires a reflective thinking of time and space beyond 'now'.

1.3. The role of intrapersonal conflict in learning experience

In this group's case, intrapersonal conflict influenced in particular Subject 1 and Subject 6's learning experiences in a way that affects their orientation to group work. However, having looked at the group's report, coherent sections were seen. For instance, each member dealt with a country in the continent and in the presentation they submitted to the tutor, the countries were handled with almost the same dimensions, such as DE institutions, methods etc. This leads us to think that they worked productively to get this result. So, we have come to the conclusion that, although these members experienced intrapersonal conflict, they nevertheless were involved in the intended knowledge production process, even though their own motivation was low.

1.4. Interpersonal Conflict

Most of the members in Group I did not exhibit any incidence of interpersonal conflict, except for Subject 1 and Subject 6. These members are also the only ones who experienced intrapersonal conflict in the group. However, with regard to their experience of interpersonal conflict, there is no tangible evidence in the data. Although each individual log on Moodle was examined, as well as the group's informal synchronous communication, consisting of task allocation logs, no incidence of conflict was detected. With regard to that, Subject 4, in the post-course questionnaire, referred to his role as a mediator when conflict emerged, whereas there is no log on Moodle that he was the mediator. Therefore, it was understood that when the group had face-to-face meetings, conflict emerged, possibly when they were doing the task allocations (e.g. Subject 1 says in the post-course questionnaire: "While allocating the topics [for the group work], we could not reach consensus").

So, did Group I members resolve the conflict? If so, how did they resolve it? According to Subject 4, his role as a mediator resolved the conflict. He also says that sometimes they reached consensus by accepting what the majority accepted, whereas according to Subject 1, when they could not reconcile, they took the tutor's suggestion as a third party, and this way they could reach a consensus. However, reaching a consensus does not mean that conflict was resolved by negotiation, as according to Subject 6, she complied with the group's solution, although she did not agree with it. She said in the focus group meeting: "The things are left without resolution".

Although this way of conflict resolution signifies a democratic solution, in Subject 6's case, this means acceptance by her, as she was not convinced by the proposed solution, but had to follow, as this was the majority's decision. This finding is consistent with Tindale's (1993:122) suggestion about the group's consensus-reaching process; he remarks that "if the correct solution is low in demonstrability, groups tend to

reach consensus through some type of majority process". A further implication of majority acceptance will be discussed in the following sections.

1.5. The role of interpersonal conflict in learning experience

In this group case, there are two patterns discernible in the influence of conflict on learning experience. These patterns vary in the different sub-groups: 1) The members who do not perceive any conflict, but realize the differences, 2) The members who perceive the conflict. In the former sub-group of members, with regard to the differences they had, these members demonstrated a positive or indifferent learning experience in their statements in the post-course questionnaires. For instance, Subject 4 said: "We benefited from learning from different point of views". In a similar way, Subject 3 replied to a question which concerns his feedback about the course by saying, "I have not come across a better course up to now". Subject 5 remained impartial, and she thought that the differences did not significantly influence their learning experience. However, there is then another sub-group which perceived the differences as a matter for conflict. Generally, in this sub-group, conflict impeded their learning in such a way that the process of social interaction within the group weakened and they could not discuss the topics in depth (Subject 6). Here, from a networked learning point of view, as Seimens (2004) suggests, depending upon the strength of links individuals have to a group or community, those with weaker ties have relatively shorter involvement and obtain less of the in-depth knowledge developed by the group.

GROUP 2

This group dealt with the topic of Distance Education in America and finalized their project on the 9th week of the course. The group consisted of 6 male and 1 female students. The group members were coded as Subjects 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 and 13.

2.1. Conflict Patterns

Conflict type : Interpersonal conflict

Dynamics of conflict : Group size, Technological factors

Result of conflict : Fragmentation

Outcomes of (perception of) conflict in group's learning: Chaos

2.2. Intrapersonal conflict

In the pre-course questionnaires, no significant differences in the members' individual values were seen. In a detailed review, members appeared to be motivated towards the course. In response to a question regarding their aims for this course, four members aimed to learn about distance education theories and practices (Subject 7, Subject 8, Subject 10 and Subject 12). The members also shared similar expectations from the course. Subject 7, Subject 8 and Subject 12 expected to gain general knowledge about DE and Subject 10 & Subject 11 did not specify any expectation from the course. This communality represents the idealized form of democratic VLCs and also, in the context of conflict, this leads to a first impression of no explicit conflict. However, this group did experience very severe conflicts on Moodle, but these conflicts concerned interpersonal conflict as will be discussed in the next section.

However, when it comes to the roles that members usually take in group work, while 4/5 members participated equally (Subject 7, Subject 8, Subject 10 and Subject 11), one student member (Subject 12) said: "I usually put in much more effort than the other members". In fact, on Moodle, he was one of the members in Group 2 who actively participated most in the discussions. Possibly because he had a higher level of interest in group work, this student member referred to his disappointment in the post-course questionnaire by saying: "Different from my group mates, while I was expecting more interaction and research, this did not happen sufficiently". During the task allocation process, although he frequently posted messages, shared his findings and suggestions, almost none of his group mates replied to his posts, even though Moodle logs show they had viewed his posts. In one of his posts, he explicitly talked about his disappointment and said (in response to Subject 9):

"[...] most of our friends hang around on the system [Moodle], they may be seeing the comments [posts] but unless they do not share their opinions, how can we know what they think [about the task allocation]? As you said, there are seven people in our group, but nobody replied to my post, except Subject 8 and you".

As happens in Subject 12's case, with regard to the nonparticipation in the group work, in particular in the computer-supported collaborative settings, conflict is triggered by a technological factor which brings about disconnection in the discussions. In Group 2, the members participated in the task allocations at different

times and places (possibly due to the number of group members which impeded their gathering together at the same time and place) and this led to conflict between them. Although, in the literature, there has been considerable debate over whether technologies promote democratization and/or emancipation of the education process (Boyd, 1987; Garrison, 1997; Riel, 1995; Sorensen & Murchu, 2004), as can be seen in this example, the technical difficulties may prevent dialogue among parties and cause conflict.

2.3 *The role of intrapersonal conflict on learning experience*

Although all the group members did not experience severe intrapersonal conflict, in particular Subject 12 encountered this type of conflict in interest and expectation and this led to disappointment with his group mates. However, he continued his active participation on Moodle and fulfilled his task. Apart from Subject 12, as they had (initial) individual values in common, their learning process started smoothly, though later on some dynamics changed members' interactions with each other and triggered interpersonal conflict.

2.4. *Interpersonal conflict*

This group publicly experienced very severe conflict on Moodle. One of the reasons why this group experienced severe conflict may be because of the number of group members (7), as this may make the process difficult to reach consensus among members. With regard to this, in the focus group meeting, Subject 13 says:

“When the group is like 10 people, because it is very heterogeneous due to the diversities, our class is the same, chaos increases. And it gets harder to overcome this in a short time. For instance, the tasks [which we] need to finish in one week turn out an impossible task [to finish in one week]”

Subject 13 refers to the diverging individual differences which became a contentious matter for the group, leading to conflict, as incompatible tendencies cannot be reconciled in a limited time, and it ends up in chaos. He remarks that, by reason of this situation, the group size triggered the emergence of conflict, as more people resulted in more incompatible differences facing the group's learning experience.

Taking a closer look at the group's experience with conflict, Subject 12 and Subject 9 became involved in severe conflict on Moodle over a task allocation. Accordingly, Subject 12 suggested a task allocation for the group members. However, Subject 9 did not support his idea, as according to him, the tasks had already been allocated and this situation inflamed the conflict between the two members:

Subject 9: (As a response to Subject 12's task allocation on Moodle)

Dear Subject 1, it is a must that there is bound to be someone impeding group work. It was just yesterday, we agreed that 3 people will deal with America and Canada; 2 people [Central] America and 2 people South America. I do not agree with what you are saying now... It is because, do not disregard the number of countries in the Americas, I spent my 6 hours only yesterday and could not find anything about distance education and now 30 countries! Easier said than done... A little conscientious ... [Behave fairly] There is still no unity in the group and definitely this is the only reason why I do not join in the group activities... Everybody is acting arbitrarily and then they call this group work...How a group can be like that...I am not doing any research or so... [from now on]No matter if I fail...

Subject 12 responds to him following the same thread:

Subject 9, yet again you approach the cases with prejudice, as in the first message. I dropped a note while allocating tasks. I think your prejudice and the difficulties you had during your research prevented you from seeing the note. Therefore, I am re-stating the note.
NOTE: IF ANYONE HAS OBJECTIONS OR SUGGESTIONS, PLEASE REMARK
Yes, I regard what you said as criticism, and I am trying to tell you that I sent an email to the tutor about the issue and got her comments when I posted this message [on Moodle]. Perhaps, you have not got her response to my email. I will also send you this email. Yes, as you said, it is not easy to [deal with] the countries [on the American continents] apart from the countries of Canada and United States. Therefore, you can have a look at the response from [the tutor] and research accordingly. Secondly, you say that it is a must that there is bound to be someone impeding group work, but if you notice it is only me who creates threads, discusses and shares. This is the reason why I am on the spot. [...]
Another thing is, yes, we are doing group work and we will be assessed based on group work and individual work. Therefore, I have a suggestion for you, if you believe that we are not doing anything as a group, then do

something individually.

Do not get me wrong but you get angry very easily. You need to be patient. Remember, you are a teacher candidate...

I NEVERTHELESS BELIEVE THAT THE TASK ALLOCATION I DID ABOVE IS APPROPRIATE AND FIND IT SUITABLE TO PRESENT IN THAT WAY. IF THE OTHER GROUP MEMBERS STATE THEIR IDEAS THEN WE CAN FIND A COMMON WAY. PERHAPS, THEN WE CAN CALL THIS GROUP WORK, WHAT DO YOU THINK? FINALLY, I REQUEST YOU TO READ WHAT YOU WROTE UNDER THE THREAD WHICH YOU CREATED.

From our point of view, the quotations above demonstrate nothing more than misunderstanding. But then what made Subject 9 and Subject 12 have a severe conflict like that? On examining the involvement of the conflict, it was noticed that, as Subject 12 initiated a discussion and made suggestions about task allocations, Subject 9 opposed his thoughts. The sequence of the interactions always followed the same pattern: Subject 12 put forward arguments whilst subsequently Subject 9 produced counter arguments. The involvement of the discussions led us to think that there may be a conflict in power relationships. Looking at both members' questionnaires to examine the power relationships, Subject 12 says that "my ideas were discussed in the group work"; whereas Subject 9 says: "Only I could hear my voice, except for one member in the group". Based on these two statements, it was concluded that as Subject 9 could not get his ideas accepted, he might have felt disadvantaged in the group and, as a reaction to the person whose ideas were predominantly accepted, he publicly argued with him and generated conflict in power relationships. Also, in their case, technological factors might have triggered the conflict among them. In his post, Subject 9 referred to the disconnection between the group decision which was taken the day before his post and Subject 12's post concerning his suggestion about the group task which was sent prior to their conflicting arguments. Here, timing of the posts is the issue in their experience with conflict, and this could be explained by the nature of asynchronous interaction (Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 1999). In parallel with this, in the post-course questionnaire, Subject 12 refers to the place of technology in his learning experience as: "Sometimes, it contributed to my learning. But on the other hand, it also caused me to have some problems and brought about a decrease in my interest".

As a result of the heated discussions and unresolved conflict, Subject 9 did not feel he belonged to the group and the conflict left him uncomfortably suspended between involvement and detachment. The conflict which emerged in the group's learning process resulted in fragmentation among members. In relation to this, Subject 13 refers to the group's solution to the conflict, which is to work in different sub-groups.

2.5 The role of interpersonal conflict on learning experience

In Group 2's case, it is very interesting to see how the structure of the topic changed through the exercise of power relationships. The topic that this group dealt with was shaped in accordance with the dominant party's comments concerning who holds the perceived power. For instance, when Subjects 9&12 experienced conflict over task allocation, Subject 12 asked the tutor's opinion. She shared her ideas as a recommendation. Subsequently, he posted a message to his group, in which he used the tutor's name as knowledge authority and presented her ideas beyond "recommendation". Here, it is interesting to observe that, in order to terminate the conflict, parties tended to hide behind an authoritative figure. In the case of this group, a (perceived) authority's opinions were influential in bringing the conflict to an end and shaping the group's end product, as in the presentation submitted to the tutor, it was noticed that the outline of the presentation was in line with the tutor's suggestion.

As a reflection of this conflict over the other members, it is understood from other members' posts that they were confused by these contrasting proposals and felt anxious because of the uncertainty of their task allocation, with only one week left before their group presentation. The conflict in argument and counterargument led to chaos for the rest of the group members, as they did not know which directions these arguments would take them.

Conclusion

In this paper, two groups' stories of conflict and the role of conflict in their learning experience are presented in the context of a VLC underpinned with democratic pedagogy. Each group exhibits different patterns and pathways of conflict in their learning process, as can be seen in Figure 1. For instance, while members of Group 1 indicated accommodating learning culture as a conflict dynamic and did not perceive any conflict, members of

Group 2 exhibited a different pathway of conflict and they were influenced by large group size and technological factors as conflict dynamics; as a result, they experienced severe conflict. Here, dynamics of conflict play an important role in emergence/avoidance and result of conflict; therefore, these dynamics need to be taken into account in a learning setting. These dynamics lead individuals, for instance, to have a pleasant or unpleasant learning experience.

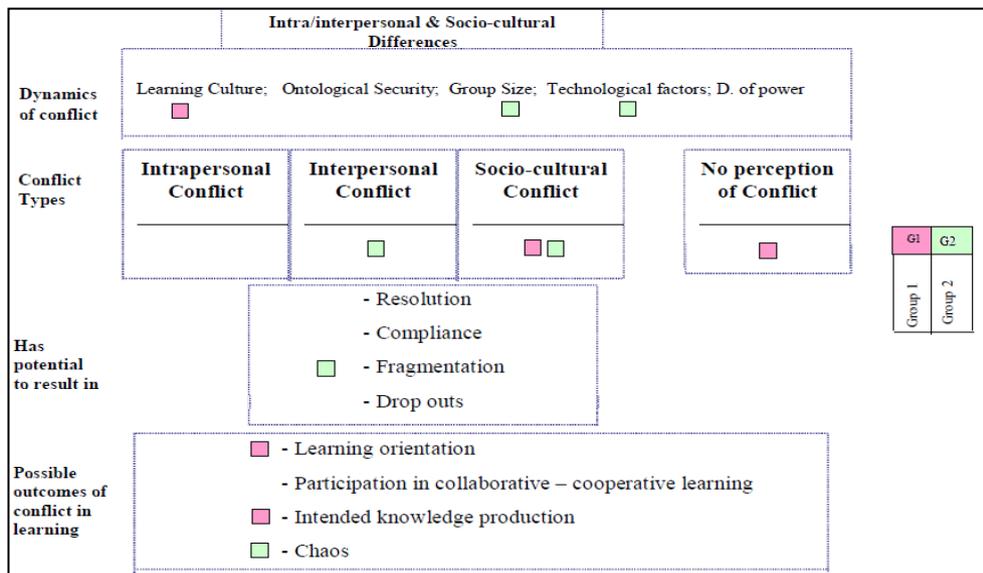


Figure 1. Visualization of conflict patterns of Group 1&2 members

Comparing Group 1, whose member did not perceive conflict, with Group 2, whose member faced severe conflict, some points can be highlighted with regard to democratic pedagogies in VLCs. In the former group, the learning culture of the group accommodated the differences and led most of the group members to benefit from the different points of view. On this point, it leads us to think that, in order to achieve optimum learning with democratic pedagogies, some factors such as accommodating learning culture must provide a base to students for dialogical learning. However, Group 1 also signifies a good example of democratic learning in the sense that it illuminates the paradoxes in democracies when conflict is seen. For instance, although at first sight it may seem like the group members did not perceive any conflict, there were 2 students who significantly referred to the conflict in their group work. According to them, after having conflicting views on tasks, although the group agreed on some aspects of the group work, this agreement was achieved through the majority's opinion, in other words, the number of people in the group. Although it is a practical methodology in democracies in terms of reaching a common decision with the number of votes, in the context of virtual learning communities, this has controversial results, such as passive acceptance. In the case of majority rule, the majority's decision is accepted as a group decision, regardless of the minority's counter arguments. Consequently, minorities are either oppressed by the dominant members who support the prevailing idea in the group or are left with a solution of accepting the prevailing ideas. According to Thompson and Ku (2006), in these situations, some learners might feel discouraged and disengaged; consequently, more conflicts are generated within a group.

Group 2's experience with conflict shows us how democratic learning sometimes requires us to have a lens through which we can observe complex learning challenges, compared to traditional learning paradigms. Accordingly, chaos takes place when there is no knowledge authority such as a didactic tutor who can dominate the learning process to bring an end to conflict. In line with this, a power relationship, which might not be crucial in traditional pedagogies, is important in democratic pedagogies, as conflict becomes a matter of power when people compete with each other to get what they want, as happens in Group 2's learning experience. As the diversities are polarized and turn into power relationships, conflict could occur as these powers actively clash. When considering conflict as a dynamic process, a strong imbalance in power relations leads to a situation with a dominant authority. This leads others to become passive and is called conformism. Faced with a dominant power, individuals might comply with the mandates.

Conflict takes an important part in technology mediated contexts. Tryon and Bishop (2009) refer to the emoticons as non-verbal strategies in online-learning settings where fewer sensory communication channels are

used by the members. However, in cases where non-verbal tools are not sufficiently used, the members are prone to fail to clarify the ambiguity of their feelings, which in turn might lead to misunderstanding; thus they aggravate any likely conflict. In a similar way, the asynchronous nature of communication may lead to disconnection in conveying messages, which accommodates the potential for emergence of conflict.

A final point concerns the role of conflict in intended knowledge construction. Drawing on Group 1 and Group 2's learning experiences, although at first sight it appears that conflict mostly causes students to have an unpleasant learning experience, in fact a more comprehensive study (Ozturk, 2011) carried out with 5 learning groups shows that conflict also facilitates knowledge construction through arguments and counterarguments in the knowledge negotiation process.

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