OVERVIEW

In our culture, we are always actively participating in groups. Whether it is at a family dinner, a meeting at work, an activity at school, or riding public transportation, interacting with others is fundamental to our lives and our experiences. The dynamic of a group and how one participates affects the nature of what one experiences within that group. This paper looks at the dynamics of how one participates in a group, and begins to explore themes that both create and affect ones experience.

For the purpose of researching this overall question, we focused on two different settings: a Diabetes Support Group at the Palo Alto Medical Foundation and an intermediate art class at Gunn High School in Palo Alto.

We chose these 2 settings because of their diverse qualifications. The Diabetes Support Group focuses on self-management and experiences with diabetes with participants who range in age from approximately 35-80 years old. The art class focuses on personal expression and representation through painting and drawing with participants who are approximately 14-16 years old. The two settings also have a lot of similarities. Both are small, ethnically-mixed groups of about 12-15 people, in conversation within a formal setting, and both are facilitated by an expert in the subject’s domain.

We conducted both interviews and observations with the research purpose of examining tendencies for participation. After observing the conversations in each of the settings, we returned to conduct the interviews. At the diabetes support group, we interviewed a woman named Agnes, who is at the higher end of the age group. At Gunn High School, we interviewed Kelsey and Jonathan, both sophomores. In order to be less obtrusive in both the interviews and observations, only one of us attended each session. Data collection methods included written field notes, audio-tapes, hand written notes and transcriptions of formal interviews. The themes identified in this paper are the results of our interpretations of the interviews and observations.

FINDINGS

We found three sub-themes in our observations: 1) role of the facilitator; 2) public image (how participants want to be “seen”); and 3) internal vs. external conversations (how participants work out their thoughts).

1. Role of the facilitator

The methods of communication between participants in both groups varied between expression of personal and emotional feelings to comments that were more analytical and intellectual in nature.
In the support group meeting, there were several participants who were very interested in talking about articles they had read over the last month. In fact, several participants had come prepared with articles and books they had found that they wanted to discuss. The facilitator, Shirley, seemed to enjoy these discussions and would also interject commentary on the current research and technology that she was aware of. Other participants preferred to express their concerns and fears. One participant, Barbara, had recently learned that she would need to start taking insulin injections. She stated her fears to the class, and several members shared their experiences with this subject. These expressions were emotional, yet positively charged. At one point Shirley commented, "Having diabetes is like brushing your teeth. It doesn't have to take over your life." To this Barbara responded, "You have such a good attitude." Thus, the expression of fear in this group didn't cause participants to simply share their fears, rather it resulted in participants trying to convey the positive side of the situation.

The conversation in the art critique was more overtly structured by the teacher. She set the framework for the discussion at the beginning, asking students to introduce themselves and their work, but allow the others to state what they thought it meant before they explained the work. A discussion about its effectiveness then followed. When conversation strayed, or there was silence, the teacher asked pointed questions or called on people. When students answered with vague, more emotional responses, the teacher asked them to be more specific, bringing the conversation to a more analytic level.

2. Public image

Another theme that emerged in our research was how individuals intend to present themselves within the group. How they choose to participate often represents how they would like to be seen publicly. What one says they do is often very different than what one does, and both of these ideas together begin to form both how they would like to be seen, and how see them. (Note: we did not research how individuals see others in the group within the scope of this project, and see this as a further avenue to pursue.)

For example, Agnes has had diabetes for seven years, and has been coming to the group since she was diagnosed. In the beginning, she came out of need to alleviate her fears: “because I was kind of desperate, I was crying. I said, gee what am I going to do? One of these days I’m going to have to inject myself.” However, as the years have passed she has developed her own personal management plan and now feels that she has “enough sense to know” how to handle her diabetes. She continues to come to the group meetings now, however, to validate and enhance her management and coping techniques. She does through active listening of people’s stories. This is what she expressed when asked what she learns from listening: "People... you get to see the other people survive and why shouldn't I?" She also uses the group sessions to bolster her plan: "[I] listen what they were saying you know their problems that's my problem too... so therefore is that was I was supposed to do maybe I should try and do a thing like that.”

Although Agnes just listens in the meetings, she involves herself by nodding while people talk about their experiences. In this way, Agnes is not just listening; she is also publicly expressing “knowing” and empathy through her body language. She indicates that she has a lot of knowledge built up over the years, but also understands the difficulty of being a newcomer.

Similarly, Kelsey creates a public identity of one who “knows” but creates this in a very different way. During the critique, Kelsey offers many thoughts to other people’s artwork, and speaks loudly and passionately about what she is seeing. She looks visibly frustrated
when no one raises their hands to speak, and offers her thoughts aggressively, as if to acknowledge that she is filling in the silence. When asked what motivates her to speak during a group critique, Kelsey responded:

“Um, mostly because, uhh, I want other people to think about my ideas and I want to hear if my ideas are valuable ones. Not because I really, particularly have that self-confidence problems, it’s just so much that I want to know if what I’m thinking is a good idea, and if it is, I, and people are like “yeah, that’s right” I can go back and apply it to, like, my own stuff.”

Others create public images that are about not knowing. We observed one student, who we call “Cickey,” sitting on the other side of the room from where the art critique was happening. Throughout the entire critique, Cickey made tapping noises, shuffled papers, and even bounced a ball throughout the critique. Eventually, the teacher asked her to leave the room. While it is unclear what Cickey was expressing through these actions, she chose to separate herself from the group. One may question whether she wanted to prove that she was not interested, was apathetic, didn’t do the work, or some other act of defiance. It is possible that her motivation for these actions was built on feeling insecure about her own work. These are all speculative, but point to areas for further questioning as to the way individuals who chose to not participate may see themselves.

3. Internal vs. external conversations

Another elusive theme we have identified that influences the dynamic of a group has to do with the different styles people have of understanding their own ideas and knowledge. For example, while he appears to have nothing to say in the critique, Jonathan, a sophomore at Gunn High School, explained in the interview that, while he often chose not to speak, he had a lot of thoughts in his head. Similar to Agnes in the support group, he chose not to publicly share them, and used the group conversation to internally validate his thoughts. We are calling this an internal conversation, where thoughts are worked out in the mind through the conversation happening in the group. Jonathan and Agnes differed a little bit in their internal conversation in that Agnes did show external confirmation of his knowledge, through her nodding.

Kelsey, on the other hand, appeared to process her thoughts through speaking. She spoke often in the critique, and made certain points multiple times. During her interview, Kelsey seemed proud that she spoke from her intuition, and implied that she does not plan what to say before she says it. She acknowledged that the teacher showed them more tangible constructs, such as “proportioning” and “shading”, to consider while working on artwork.

Sandy And did the, does that knowledge help you in a critique?

Kelsey Um... yeah, I'm kind of tempted to say “no”. Like, I know some basics stuff like you want to put the dark in the background so it looks like, have more depth, but I mean little stuff like that, but, um, I'm such an instinctive person in general if you talk to my friend, Alex, she's the one of us to talk to, she knows a lot more about that kind of stuff so she'd probably say while she does work a lot on instinct, she knows so much about like the formalized stuff, that she does work a lot on it but I know such little about it and I have always worked off of instinct in general, that that's just what I base most of my stuff on.

Kelsey trusts her intuition and uses it to comment on other people’s work. She leads with her feelings, and processes those ideas in the conversation. While she appears to be a knowledgeable leader in the group, the information she knows is not tangible to her until
she works out her thoughts externally, eliciting conversations around ideas she has not yet formed.

CONCLUSION

We investigated three complex themes around group dynamics in this paper: role of the facilitator, public image, and internal vs. external conversations. These themes alone certainly require a more thorough review and breadth of study. These themes have also generated some other interesting questions. One of these questions involves the kind of atmosphere that is created by a group facilitator. In the support group, the facilitator preferred to keep the group very upbeat by not allowing prolonged episodes of negative emotions. Thus, over time, the people who remained in this group tended to be people who preferred to discuss the more intellectual topics of diabetes. It would be interesting to see how these people, especially Agnes, would function in a group with a different type of facilitator.

Another interesting question to further investigate is how the different types of “knowers” affect their environment. Do the “knowers” who express themselves publicly positively affect the people around them? Do the “knowers” who nod in agreement allow people more room for personal reflection? On the same note, what kind of environment is created by people who work out their thoughts internally versus externally?

Overall, the combination of different study locations allowed us to gain a deeper insight into group participation, and helped us see many more questions to continue to ask.