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The roles came out of an attempt of a team of us to try and pack what was effective, collaborative, team interactions. As the practice of shifting from an individualistic approach to teaching to a more collaborative approach started increasing, people started recognizing that there were more and more problems. It wasn’t always working. So obviously, simply putting students into groups or teams was not enough to get the types of things that people wanted students to get out of it. And so we started asking really important questions as a community, and that is “why wasn’t it working?” Trying to identify what was at the heart of these problems, and many people have agreed that part of what is going on, the big part of the story, is at the process level. And what I mean by that is “what are the types of processes that are going on between people who are working in these groups?” And once we tried to figure out what were the types of behaviors that were desired, what are the types of things that actually help people to learn better, perform better, then these are the types of things we would like for people to do. The types of behaviors we would like people to support. And this is where the roles came from. It was really an attempt to try and get people to understand what are the important aspects of effective collaboration, how can we try and get them to occur in teams, how can we support them, how can we pay attention to them, and try increase them.

So a few of the things that are important to the roles in general. The first thing is that, consistently successful teams have both excellent processes and excellent products. Products are simple enough to define. These are the things that a team has to accomplish -- The deliverables, the project -- Things related to a task. Process, however, is a little bit more complicated. So if you think about the products as the end destination then the processes would be the journey. It’s how you get the deliverables or work done. And we’re going to be talking about four important processes: communication, mediation, planning and productivity. Now the difference between managing a process and playing a role I think is an important one. Because the way that these roles are designed was more as a management plan, and what I mean by that is when you play a role it’s almost as if you take on that role and that responsibility to be your own. So, for example, the mediation manager would be doing all the critical evaluation. They would be the ones playing devil’s advocate or something of that nature. But what we would like for the managers to do is rather than do all the behaviors and all the things themselves it’s to really push and encourage everyone in the team to pay attention to it. So ideally, towards the end of the project you should see everyone take part in the planning, everyone taking part in evaluation, and all the other processes we think that are important.

Lastly, we designed these roles to kind of work together, and that is very much because the goal of collaborative learning and collaborative development is a process that should be joined. And what we mean by that is that the communication manager and the mediation manager often have to work together to make sure that people are discussing ideas together, they’re understanding ideas while at the same time critically evaluating and keeping things positive. And the same is true of the productivity and the planning manager. The planning manager sets the rules for the game and the productivity
manager kind of checks as things go along to make sure that either the plans are being followed or that the plans, if need to be modified, can be done so accordingly.

So hopefully with these few little tidbits about the roles we can get started in terms of understanding them more in depth.