



Chapter III

Who's Talking Online II: Revisiting Gender and Online Communications

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Abstract

This descriptive study investigated the association between gender and online communication that involved participants from two online graduate courses. The study implemented a descriptive model in that "student involvement" was assessed by tabulating and recording the quantity and quality of student activity in the discussion threads. Quantity was recorded by the amount of times students posted online comments and the number of words that women and men used to make their responses. In addition, quality was examined by reviewing the content that women and men made concerning topics under discussion. A difference between the genders was found in that the quantity women contributed to the discussions exceeded the men. Women were also more inclined to give supportive or encouraging remarks than men, and addressed their classmates by name to promote a sense of online community, all of which support previous studies.

Introduction

Delivering courses through the World Wide Web in higher education is a growing trend that has taken precedence at many colleges and universities. As the population of non-traditional students increase and the pervasiveness of computer technology reaches an all-time high in education, delivering online courses has become an alternative medium to offering coursework and degree programs to remote students who are not physically present on campus (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003). The push for educators to offer more online courses or adapt existing courses to an online medium will not disappear. In fact, more online courses will be offered to students as an alternative mode for completing educational degree programs, an occurrence that was inconceivable 15 years ago (Picciano, 2001).

This trend for promoting online courses in higher education also creates concerns for both the teacher and student. Some of these concerns include factors such as management, communication, interaction, discipline and retention (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). Communication is one of these key factors for student success. Studies have looked at student isolation and disillusionment as contributory factors toward impairing student retention and effective learning. Communication between student-teacher and student-student is important toward alleviating feelings of isolation. Another aspect of communication is participation. There is an assumption that the more a student participates in an online course, the better success that student will find in acquiring and learning the material related to the course (Picciano, 2001b).

One question that arises concerning online communication is whether gender of the student is a contributing factor toward learning success. Although research has shown that females and males differ in terms of their attitudes toward computer use and computer aptitude, women and men are still both users of computer technology—a direct opposite to the notion that females are not as technologically inclined as males (Whitley, 1996). In addition, many have voiced that the Internet is a more neutral playing field for both men and women to enjoy. In a sense, the Internet has been claimed to lead toward greater gender equity because of its communication interface (Herring, 2001; Gorriz & Medina, 2000). Furthermore, scholars say that the Internet should be taken seriously to help create opportunities for less powerful individuals to participate with members who are more vocal, especially in asynchronous environments (Balka, 1993; Selfe & Meyer, 1991; We, 1993).

Because research on Web-based instruction is relatively new, particularly in the aspect of communication effectiveness in relation to gender, there is a paucity of research that investigates how women and men communicate online. Few studies investigate the use and integration of online communication in reference to gender, but more research needs to be performed that examines the amount of communication that occurs between men and women (Arbaugh, 2000; Shaw & Gant, 2002; Sullivan, 2001). The old assumption that women are more verbal and, thus, more inclined to

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