

Chapter 6

Exploring the Correlation between Online Teacher Dispositions and Practices in Virtual Classrooms and Student Participation and Satisfaction

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ABSTRACT

Greater teacher efficacy in online teaching and teaching in a virtual world appears to be positively correlated with certain exhibited dispositions and practices. Inferential measures of dispositions such as friendliness, enthusiasm, active involvement, patience, and tolerance, among others, exhibited by professors in online instruction lead to greater student participation and satisfaction. By analyzing four professors teaching in the virtual world environment, two with positive student reviews and two with negative or mediocre student reviews, certain teacher dispositions and practices emerged. Three areas were studied: instructor participation with students, the tone of communication with students, and the creation of a community of learners in a virtual world. Instructor participation with students was measured by the interaction and guidance in discussion board questions, comments on graded student work, the amount of measured user time of the instructor while teaching online, and student evaluations. The tone of communication with students was measured by professor communications with students in the discussion boards, virtual office responses to student questions, and whole class as well as individual emails. The creation of a community of learners in a virtual environment helps to foster a sense of belonging, and was measured by activities such as informal course announcements, media, emails, and student and professor biographies, indicating that the instructor is interested in each student. There

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are two perspectives to online instruction: that of the student as well as that of the instructor. In order to provide a valid base for analysis, it is important to consider both. A search of the literature revealed almost no information in the areas of focus of this study. Further research is needed to identify positive behaviors by instructors leading to greater online instructor efficacy when teaching in virtual worlds.

INTRODUCTION

Access to higher education is now possible through the use of technology. Distance education is widely accepted as high quality education. Technology and the creation of virtual environments allow the learning to be personalized according to the individualized needs of each student. Although mentally and visually stimulating, involvement in the virtual world can be isolating for the individual. Therefore, it is important for the instructor to be supportive and to create a sense of community that bonds the class and enables the students to function as a cohesive unit.

In a study of student interaction in virtual classrooms, the authors found that online courses were superior to real world courses in regard to the effectiveness of student interaction with each other and with the instructor resulting in courses that were also more effective. Whether it is in traditional classrooms or in a virtual environment, student interactions with each other and with the instructor are vital to learning and teaching effectiveness. Students expect this human interaction, and instructors must provide it in order to be effective. In a virtual world, virtual interactions and virtual discussions must be cultivated (Hay, Hodgkinson, Peltier, & Drago, 2004).

As an increasing number of students elect to pursue their degrees online, it becomes critical to identify and implement teaching behaviors that support student learning. Greater teacher efficacy in online teaching appears to be positively correlated with certain exhibited dispositions and practices. Inferential measures of dispositions such as friendliness, enthusiasm, active involvement, patience, and tolerance, among others,

exhibited by professors in online instruction in virtual worlds lead to greater student participation and satisfaction.

Teacher reform agencies in the United States, such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the largest accrediting agency, emphasize the importance of certain dispositions in teacher candidates and require that student dispositions are assessed and supported in teacher education programs. Additionally, the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC) now measures whether a teacher's internal existence aligns with appropriate professional dispositions. There is an effort by various agencies to professionalize the field of teaching, which has a long history tracing back to the days of early colonization. These agencies are following a pattern formed by successful elite professions, such as medicine and law, which have been able to convince society that their members possess certain specialized skills and knowledge that should be respected and valued. Members of these professions internalize the dispositions, or legitimate ways of knowing and behaving, that are valued by each profession and which are known as virtue ethics (McKnight, 2004).

DISPOSITIONS

According to Aristotle, a disposition is related to a specific desire toward a virtuous or vicious end. This is very similar to the concept of the virtue ethic. Dispositions become part of people's ingrained behavior, and are developed after they have experienced a significant portion of their lives. Reason and emotion become harmonious,

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