

Chapter 4

Gender Differences in Online Communication of Teacher Preparation Students

William J. Gibbs
Duquesne University, USA

Ronan S. Bernas
Eastern Illinois University, USA

ABSTRACT

Research has shown that gender disparities exist in online communication. Understanding the factors that enable students to effectively communicate online and ultimately manage their own discussions has important learning and pedagogical implications. This study examined the communication and interactional processes of peer-directed online discussions. Gender disparities were found in communication styles and in the use of socio-emotional content. Men were expository whereas messages posted by women were of an epistolary nature. Women used socio-emotional content more than men. However, interactions, such as the extent to which men and women persisted in message threads as well as responded to one another, were comparable overall. Although not significant, women posted more messages of longer length but men received more replies to their messages. The findings have important pedagogical implications for educators who wish to engage students in peer-directed text-based asynchronous discussions.

INTRODUCTION

The use of text-based asynchronous computer mediated communication (CMC) in educational courses presents a number of advantages while, at the same time, it poses challenges for educators. Educational online discussions, for example, enable students to contribute at times convenient to them and to reflect on responses before submitting them. However, ef-

fectively implementing and managing discussions can be demanding. Instructors who attempt to read and respond to messages during an active conference may become inundated unless they use methods to manage dialogue and/or pedagogical techniques to accomplish the learning objectives. How to successfully manage discussions is a topic of interest to educators. Increasingly, they are capitalizing on the uniqueness of text-based CMC to provide students with opportunities to manage their own online communities of learning, where learners engage in

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dialogue with minimal instructor intervention. Not only are peer-directed activities potentially more manageable for instructors, they are advantageous from a learning perspective. The CMC environment engenders constructivist approaches such as collaborative learning and peer-directed activities that may promote learner-centeredness and self-direction (Murphy, Harvell, Sanders, & Lu Epps, 1999). For instance, students may be charged with initiating and sustaining discussion. Such responsibility will likely offer them insights into group interaction, information management, and peer-conflict; domains typically dealt with by instructors. These novel situations can stimulate discourse beneficial to learning (Fahy, 2003; Juler, 1990), expose students to diverse perspectives, and embolden their self-sufficiency.

Providing students increased autonomy to manage their own online discussions raises key questions such as (a) will rude or asocial behavior become more prevalent because discussions are not actively monitored by an instructor; (b) will individuals dominate and/or censor others or inhibit participation; and (c) will gender disparities be more pronounced. Research indicates that there are marked differences in male and female communication styles and the disparities generally do a disservice to women. Herring (2000) reports that compared to men, women post fewer messages, receive fewer replies, and, at times, are discouraged from participating. The extent to which such disparities affect communication in peer-directed discussions has important learning and pedagogical implications. The present study investigated the communications of men and women in peer-directed online discussions to more fully understand the role gender plays in activities that are managed primarily by students.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The researchers' rationale for analyzing male-female communication was predicated on two

assumptions: (a) in CMC environments educators employ learner-centered approaches that afford students increased control over learning activities and ultimately their own learning. Students are often given responsibility for creating and sustaining online peer-directed discussions; (b) gender differences have been shown to exist in male-female online communication and interaction, which may profoundly affect communication. The dynamics of or interactional exchanges occurring within peer-directed discussions may exacerbate gender disparities.

THE ONLINE ENVIRONMENT AND GENDER

Mann and Stewart (2000) citing Lee (1996) state that because visual or non-verbal cues, so distinctive of face-to-face communication, are absent in CMC, biases that disenfranchise lower-status groups would be eliminated. Since gender is not revealed through visual channels some predicted that gender inequalities would diminish (Jeong & Davidson-Shivers, 2006). Others contend that online social interactions exist in a context dominated by racial, gender, age, and class dynamics (Mann & Stewart, 2000; Kramarae, 1995) where individuals can glean information about discussants in subtle ways. Discussants may react to one another based on presumptions about gender because gender information is revealed through interactions, politeness markers in messages, and/or communication style (Herring, 1993, 1996a, 2000, 2003). Moreover, during social interactions, people of lower-status groups often self-monitor their language use and non-verbal communication in ways that underscore predominant stereotypes about role relationships (Arnold & Miller, 2001). It is also likely that discussants bring preexistent notions, learned early in life, about hierarchy and control to CMC environments wherein males are often perceived to fill the dominant role in social relations (Pedersen & Macafee, 2007). Thus, elec-

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