Chapter 5.21
Computer-Mediated Communication that Brings Learning into the Present:
Gender Differences in Status Differentials and Self-Disclosure in Online Peer Teaching

Linda Seward
Middle Tennessee State University, USA

Vickie Harvey
California State University, USA

Joseph Carranza
California State University, USA

ABSTRACT

A two-part assignment was designed which paired students together using e-mail technology that required them to engage in peer teaching. This allowed us to study computer-mediated communication that was not part of a discussion group or chat room. An analysis of the e-mails revealed that males and females did not differ in frequency, length or use of social incentives. Males sent slightly more status enhancement messages while females sent more status recognition messages. Significant gender differences occurred, however, in the use of apologies and in how personal weaknesses or bad experiences were characterized. Unexpectedly, university affiliation was more significant than gender in the amount of self-disclosure.

INTRODUCTION

Despite extensive research into gender differences in interpersonal interactions (Bate, 1988; Ivy and Backlund, 1994; Fox, Bukatco, Hallahan, & Crawford, 2007; Tannen, 1990, 1994; Wood, 2002), this aspect was initially overlooked as a factor of analysis in studies that focused on computer-mediated communication (CMC). According to Susan Herring, this was not surprising given the dominance of males in the development and use of the technology (1994). Subsequent studies have begun to investigate gender and have found differences in computer discussion groups which indicate that gender norms may transcend the expected neutralizing affect of CMC.

In this study, gender as a factor in computer-mediated communication that was not part of a discussion group, or chat room, was examined. Instead, we analyzed messages that more closely resembled face-to-face interactions in that each person corresponded with one other person at any one time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many of the proponents of computer-mediated communication are endorsing it as a means of lowering social barriers that occur in face-to-face mixed sex interaction (Spears & Lea, 1994). As a channel that obscures issues such as gender, age, and physical appearance, CMC is regarded as an approach that would allow women and men the opportunity to relate equally. There is research, however, that indicates the inequalities found in face-to-face interactions may spill over into computer-mediated interactions. That is, corollaries can be found between research on male dominance in mixed sex dyads and computer mediated interactions. For example, Selfe and Meyer (1991) found that men post twice as many electronic messages as women do, while Fox et al. (2007) found that males tend to receive more messages and messages containing more words. Kramarae and Taylor (1993) found that men control topic discussion even in women-related and women-only bulletin boards. Even online membership indicated a gender difference in that many more men than women were present in online discussion groups (Savicki, Lingenfelter & Kelley, 1996b; Wasserman & Abbott, 2005).

There is some research that found gender differences online tended to complement traditional gender roles regarding personal discussion (Herring, 1993; Kaplan & Farrell, 1994). Karge (2001) found that women posted a greater number of messages of apology in mixed discussion groups. Fox's (2007) study found that women are more expressive than men and that messages sent by women contained more references to emotion. Women tended to have longer communications than men in both e-mail and letters, and also used more positive intensifiers, humor, and multiple exclamations (Colley, et al., 2004). Guiller & Dumdell (2006) found that "female postings were more likely to contain attenuated language and positive socio-emotional content, whereas male postings were more likely to feature authoritative language and negative socio-emotional content" (p. 10). Females were also significantly more likely to give explicit statements of agreement while men tended to give significantly more explicit statements of disagreement (Guiller & Dumdell). A higher proportion of males also used offensive language more often than women (Colley, et al., 2004).

Aries (1998) found that gender differences are not found in every situational context, but depend upon: the context of the interaction, task demands, interaction length, gender composition of the group, and the relationships among participants. Savicki et al. (1996a) found that women's groups were more self-disclosed, used more references to "I" pronouns (me, my), and presented more opinions, while male groups were less apt to change opinions. Savicki et al. also found that in mixed discussion groups, the minority gender adhered