Who’s Talking Online?
A Descriptive Analysis of Gender & Online Communication

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ABSTRACT
This preliminary descriptive study investigated the association between gender and online communication and involved participants from an online graduate course. 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. In the end, a difference between the genders was found in that the amount (quantity) women contributed to the discussions exceeded that contributed by 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 which support previous studies.

Keywords: collaboration; distance learning; gender bias; online communications

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 increases and the pervasiveness of computer technology has reached 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 new 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 their educational degree programs, a circumstance that was incomprehensible 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 the feelings of isolation. Another aspect of communication is participation. There is an assumption that more a student participates in an online course, the better success that he/she 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 (Gorriz & Medina, 2000; Herring, 2001). 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. There are few studies that 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 communicate in online discussions and e-mail needs to be analyzed more closely (Shaw & Gant, 2002; Waldeck, Kearney & Plax, 2001).

This article reports upon a pilot study that investigated gender differences in a distance-learning course on the use of online communication tools. The article is divided into three sections. First, an overview of the study is discussed in addition to providing a summary of the literature. The literature is primarily based upon the area of technology and gender differences in education to help build a theoretical base toward analyzing the influence of gender in online communication activities. Second, the article will explain the results of the
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