Are Cross-Gender Conversations in Threaded Discussions Reminiscent of Communicating Across Cultural Boundaries?

David Gefen, Drexel University, USA
Nitza Geri, The Open University of Israel, Israel
Narasimha Paravastu, Central State University, USA

ABSTRACT

At the core of sociolinguistic theory is the recognition that men and women when engaging in an open conversation communicate differently because of their different respective social objectives in communication. Oral conversations are, according to sociolinguists, akin to cross cultural conversations and hence the tendency toward same-gender conversations. Extrapolating to the realm of threaded discussions in online courses, these gender differences, it is hypothesized, should translate into mild gender segregation in the threaded discussions as well as men showing a greater proclivity to dominate the discussion. Data from 233 students in 27 courses support these hypotheses and allow a significant identification of the gender of the student based on whom they reference in the threaded discussion and the way they reference others. Implications on managing threaded discussions are discussed.

Keywords: culture; distance learning; gender; sociolinguistics; threaded discussions

INTRODUCTION

Conversation is more than an exchange of words and the meaning they convey. A central part of conversation is to carry a social message and the relating social segregation this creates. Unconsciously, both men and women insert into their conversations a rich social message. The trouble is that men and women communicate with very different social objectives. So different can these objectives be that men and women may totally misunderstand the underlying meaning an opposite gender member is making. Typically, men, more than women, communicate with an objective of establishing and maintaining their social status, while women, more than men, communicate to broadcast rapport. The result is often a cross-cultural misunderstanding (Tannen, 1994). Often a direct consequence of these differing social objectives and cross-cultural misunderstandings is gender-segregated discussions, both in underlying meaning and in who talks to whom.
In gender-segregated discussions, men prefer to talk to other men and women prefer to talk to other women. This is the basic premise of sociolinguistics (Yates, 2001).

The applicability of this idea, originally conceived in the socially rich context of oral conversations, to the Internet with its more lean social context has received some verification in recent years (Gefen & Ridings, 2005). Virtual communities in which people freely interact online as though they were interacting face to face in a social club exhibit much of the same gender-related behavior predicted by sociolinguistics. Men join these communities to gather and share information, while women do so to give and share social support. Moreover, although many virtual communities are voluntarily mostly single-gender communities, when men seek social support in virtual communities, they go to mixed-gender communities, supporting the typically stereotyped tendency of men to center their communication on the social side of things. Likewise, when women seek information, they go to mixed-gender communities, supporting the typically stereotyped tendency of men to center their communication on information exchange (Gefen & Ridings, 2005). These cross-gender boundary preferences portray the characteristic gender behavior observed in oral communication (Hannah & Murachver, 1999). And, across cultures, business-related e-mail messages, although generally not there to serve a social purpose, are perceived differently by men than by women, with women significantly sensing more social presence in these e-mails and as a result perceiving them as a more useful medium in their work (Gefen & Straub, 1997).

But whether and how this applies to online class settings remain open questions. These are important questions to answer because threaded discussions are among the most valuable activities in online classes (Levy, 2006). On the face of it, in the controlled social environment of an online class, threaded discussion and the limited power play available in these settings should make these gender tendencies, especially the need for social dominance by men and the voluntary gender segregation, rather mute. On the other hand, if these are indeed ingrained gender-based characteristics, as opposed to being socially and context oriented, then these gender tendencies should come through even in these very lean social settings. Moreover, and relating to the second part of the research question, the very controlled online class environment, with its dictated rules of conduct, makes many of the typical gender-related behaviors inapplicable. Nonetheless, how these behaviors may come through is the other open-ended question. The objective of this study is to empirically examine this and, in doing so, to raise the need to consider these gender differences in threaded discussion in online courses.

These issues are important. Although online learning has gained considerable growth in recent years, there are many student drop-outs making student retention a major concern (Rovai, 2002). One facet of the online threaded discussions is to replace of face-to-face class discussions and enhance learning. The other facet is overcoming the “loneliness of the long-distance learner” (Eastmond, 1995). Online discussions are aimed at solving this problem and increasing retention (Guri-Rosenblit, 2005). Hence, it is crucial to conduct these discussions effectively by creating the appropriate social atmosphere to support the online learning process.

The data, which examines some prominent gender differences in communication style embedded in the online discussions, show that men and women do generally communicate differently, and there is some preference for same-gender communication within the shared class threaded discussion, even in the socially lean and rigid environment of online course discussions. While there was no support to the hypothesis that women would show more empathy than men would, there was support for the hypothesis that men would show more socially dominating behavior. These effects while weak in the entire data became strong when examining only students who took advantage of the online conversations to engage with other students.
10 more pages are available in the full version of this document, which may be purchased using the "Add to Cart" button on the product’s webpage:

www.igi-global.com/article/cross-gender-conversations-threaded-discussions/2317?camid=4v1


www.igi-global.com/e-resources/library-recommendation/?id=2

Related Content

Collaboration in Online Communications
Albert L. Ingram and Lesley G. Hathorn (2005). Encyclopedia of Distance Learning (pp. 264-268).
www.igi-global.com/chapter/collaboration-online-communications/12116?camid=4v1a

Anonymity-Featured Group Support Systems and Creativity
www.igi-global.com/chapter/anonymity-featured-group-support-systems/12093?camid=4v1a

A Cross-Cultural Validation of the Selwyn's Computer Attitude Scale (CAS)
Timothy Teo (2010). International Journal of Information and Communication Technology Education (pp. 36-46).
www.igi-global.com/article/cross-cultural-validation-selwyn-computer/42140?camid=4v1a
Diagnosing Student Learning Outcomes Using the Organizational Learning Contract Framework
www.igi-global.com/article/diagnosing-student-learning-outcomes-using/76312?camid=4v1a