

Community and Gender in the Virtual Classroom

Alfred P. Rovai

Regent University, USA

Jason D. Baker

Regent University, USA

INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have demonstrated that alternative educational experiences, such as online learning, produce outcomes similar to face-to-face instruction provided the method and technologies used are appropriate to the instructional tasks, there is student-to-student interaction, and there is timely teacher-to-student feedback (Verduin & Clark, 1991). However, a meta-analysis of 232 comparative studies conducted by Bernard et al. (2004) concludes that while there is no average difference in achievement between distance and classroom courses, the results demonstrate wide variability. In other words, “a substantial number of DE applications provide better achievement results, are viewed more positively, and have higher retention rates than their classroom counterparts. On the other hand, a substantial number of DE applications are far worse than classroom instruction” (p. 406).

These findings suggest that appropriate instructional design and good pedagogical practices, rather than the computer mediating technology itself, is at the center of effective online education. The growing demand for online learning only increases the challenges associated with designing and delivering effective instruction. O’Donoghue, Jentz, Singh, and Molyneux (2000) note that “The diversity of demand from these client groups therefore has to be matched by a diversity of supply. ... Meeting those requirements means putting the student at the centre of the system, which in itself represents a substantial change” (Section III, para. 6). When considering such a student-centered approach to online learning, the instructor needs to become increasingly aware of the differences among students and how those differences influence the educational experience.

One area of student differences that warrants further consideration in the online classroom is gender, especially since distance education has been extensively marketed to women since early correspondence programs (Kramarae, 2003). “Distance education is ... yet another institution where gender and power differences are constructed, and to ignore the ways that gender is under construction online is to ignore many difficult experiences of real people” (p. 269). von Prümmer and Rossié (2001) go further and declare that, “If gender is not seen as relevant, the system will not be equally accessible to women and men and will offer men more chances to succeed” (p. 137).

BACKGROUND

Online Community

A recurring theme in online education literature is the importance of developing a learning community to foster effective instruction. Palloff and Pratt (1999) call for the development of academic communities in online distance classes and declare, “without the support and participation of a learning community, there is no online course” (p. 29). In a similar vein, Moller (1998) writes that “the potential of asynchronous learning can only be realized by designing experiences and environments which facilitate learning beyond the content-learner interaction. To that end, it becomes necessary to create learner support communities” (pp. 115-116). Such online learning communities provide a framework for social reinforcement and information exchange while girding the learning experience with academic, intellectual, and interpersonal support.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) endorse this view for the virtual classroom by noting community is extremely valuable, if not essential, in the development of higher-order learning because it provides the social context in which learning occurs. Students strengthen their learning by listening and interacting with faculty and other students. Moreover, strong community promotes the creation of partnerships for study groups and collaborative learning. Wegerif (1998) reports the social dimension of online learning to be an important predictor of the success of the distance learner. He concludes that forming a sense of community is a necessary first step for collaborative learning, without which students are likely to be unwilling to take the risks involved in learning.

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is needed that fosters cooperation and supports social order at the classroom community level. Gunawardena (1995) observes that “in computer conferences, the social interactions tend to be unusually complex because of the necessity to mediate group activity in a text based environment. Failures tend to occur at the social level far more than they do at the technical level” (p. 148). These failures can include interpersonal conflict, low participation rates, disappointing collaboration, and low learning performances in terms of quality of learning and learner satisfaction. Chester and Gwynne (1998) observe that CMC is associated with higher levels of antisocial behavior, which is the antithesis of the mutual respect that teaching aims to foster and that is required in community building. One contributing factor is the communication pattern differences among members of the community. Lack of respect, inability to listen, and a general lack of sensitivity to others in a CMC environment pose an immense risk to learning.

Fritz (1997) compared organizational peer relationships between men and women and found that while men and women had roughly the same quantity of peer relationships, the relational dynamics differed. She notes that “women’s relationships in organizations, similar to what appears to be the case in nonorganizational contexts, have the potential to be stronger and, among very close friends, are characterized by greater strength” (p. 41). Conversely, Fritz found that “men find relationships functional as well, but, socialized to be more inde-

pendent, they simply do not experience as much closeness in their same-sex relationships” (p. 41). Such findings are consistent with other research (e.g., Tannen, 1991) that highlights differences in communicative and relational patterns between men and women. Such differences are thus likely to have an impact on the development of an online learning community as well as individual reactions to the virtual classroom experience.

Communication Patterns

Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) theorize two paths of normal development in adult learning, which result in two different communication patterns: (a) the relational, connected, or interdependent path, which reflects the majority of women (and some men); and (b) the self-sufficient, autonomous, or independent path, which is typical of the majority of men (and some women). This model suggests that many female students place emphasis on relationships and prefer to learn in an environment where cooperation is stressed over competition. The connected voice nurtures classroom community building while the independent voice does not. In particular, the professional literature suggests that most women seek to establish *intimacy* in a relationship, whereas most men seek to establish *status* in a hierarchy, measured in terms of *independence* (Tannen, 1991).

Gilligan (1982) points out that her different voice is characterized by an ethic of caring that men as well as women can espouse. Noddings (1984) elaborates this ethic of caring as “feminine in the deep classical sense—rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” (p. 2). For Noddings, caring is based on reciprocity—one caring and one cared-for—and recognizes “human encounter and affective response as a basic fact of human existence” (p. 4). In this framework, both parties contribute actively to this relationship of caring. Cole and McQuin (1992) identify the following traits of an ethic of care: “a predisposition to nurture, a ready capacity for emotional involvement, a need to be sensitive about relationships and how they generate different varieties of responsibility to others, and a willingness to value particularity, connection, and context” (pp. 2-3).

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