Gender and Differences in Online Teaching Styles

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INTRODUCTION

Researchers interested in the role gender plays in the educational environment have investigated differences in the teaching styles of men and women in the face-to-face classroom (Caplan, 1994; Clegg, Trayhurn, & Johnson, 2000; Proost, Elen, & Lowyck, 1997; Statham, Richardson, & Cook, 1991; Sullivan, 1999). In distance education, the differences between the teaching styles of men and women are similar to those noted in the face-to-face classroom (Barrett, 2004; Dupin-Bryant, 2004). In both educational settings, men and women prefer different teaching styles. In the face-to-face classroom, differences in the teaching styles of male and female faculty members have depicted women as leaning more towards a learner-centered style than men, even though men and women are exposed to similar experiences in their own educational endeavors (Moulton, 1992; Scotney, 1986; Statham et al., 1991; Stickney-Taylor & Sasse, 1990). The purpose of this discussion is to use research on teaching styles to provide more information about the online environment for those who will be teaching, learning, or administrating online distance education.

BACKGROUND

Teaching styles have been defined in numerous ways. The following background sections lay a foundation for exploring teaching styles. The first section provides a general overview and definitions of teaching style followed by a brief section focused on the recent direction of online distance education. The subsequent section highlights gender theories with a focus on communication and decision-making. These areas are the main framework for understanding gender differences in online teaching styles.

Defining Teaching Styles

Teaching styles have been explored in a variety of ways. Grasha (1996) used categories to explore teachings. He offered five distinct teaching styles including Expert, Formal Authority, Personal Model, Facilitator, and Delegator. Conti (1978) created a continuum with a learner-centered style on one end and a teacher-centered style on the other. In order to highlight the details of teaching style, Conti used the continuum to develop seven factors: (1) learner-centered activities, (2) personalizing instruction, (3) relating to experience, (4) assessing student needs, (5) climate building, (6) participation in the learning process, and (7) flexibility for personal development. Each of these factors is also measured on the learner-centered to teacher-centered continuum.

Although Conti's Principles of Adult Learning Scale (PALS) was originally designed to describe teaching styles in the face-to-face environment, it has been researched and applied in numerous environments including the online environment. For the purposes of this discussion, Conti's PALS frames the differences in teaching styles based on gender.

Conti (1985a) defines teaching styles as a set of behaviors that are consistent regardless of the setting or course being taught. Numerous studies have validated this definition by demonstrating the consistency of teaching styles from setting to setting (Chanchaem, 2001; Totin Meyer, 2002). Although various researchers and theorists have defined teaching style as an instructor's set of behaviors that are consistent from setting to setting and from course to course, an instructor's teaching style falls within a range.

In the face-to-face classroom setting, Conti defined the learner-centered style as a "method of instruction in which authority for curriculum formatting is jointly shared by the learner and practitioner"

(Conti, 1985a, p. 7). He referred to the teacher-centered style as one where the instructor takes the majority of the responsibility for directing the learning environment. Others have characterized a teacher-centered style as one where instructors implement more traditional teaching techniques in an effort to transmit knowledge to the learners (Jarvis, 1995).

Educators over the years have argued the superiority of teaching styles. More recently, the argument has focused on *when* a particular teaching style is most useful (Miglietti & Strange, 1998). Although an occasional researcher has argued that one teaching style is the most effective including for the online environment (DiBiase, 2000), others have noted that an effective teaching style varies based on the content, the learners and the environment (Miglietti & Strange, 1998). Other researchers have compared the two environments and investigated the impact on teaching style when an instructor transfers a face-to-face course to the online environment. In such an instance, Chanchaem (2001) found no significant difference in the teaching styles of those who moved to an online environment.

Even though a variety of teaching styles are desirable, Conti's research along with that of a few others (Conti, 1985b; Miglietti & Strange, 1998; Post, Carusetta, Maher, & Macintosh, 1998) makes a viable argument for a teaching style that favors a learner-centered style because of more positive learning outcomes in classrooms where instructors implement such a style. In the community college arena, O'Banion (1997) has promoted the learning college which focuses on learner-centered activities as the most effective environment for meeting students' need for an education that is accessible anytime, any place, and any way. Regardless, no single teaching style meets the needs of all learning styles; each has its advantages and disadvantages. Exploring issues related to online distance education will further enhance this discussion on gender differences and teaching styles.

Online Distance Education

Online distance education, which has its roots in correspondence courses and has a long history of providing alternative access to education, has changed drastically over the past decade. Some institutions entered online distance education by encouraging faculty to move their correspondence courses to the Web. This mindset perpetuated the notion that students are empty vessels to be filled with the wisdom of an expert either through books or through some form of textual means of connecting with the content. As such, this notion would dictate a more teacher centered-style.

Educators and observers of the educational environment have often assumed that technology would alter the learning environment. Early studies of educational technology determined that the delivery method did not play a key role in altering the learning environment. Russell's (1999) No Significant Difference studies make the point that there is little difference between the face-to-face classroom and the online environment. Consequently, a learner may find the online educational environment similar to the face-to-face environment. The similarities may be greater now considering the history of online distance education.

Less than 10 years ago faculty were learning html and designing Web sites as a way to offer their courses online. At that time, the process for offering a course in the online environment was very tedious. Faculty often resorted to merely loading their notes to a Web site and calling it an online course. For students, interaction with the other learners and the instructor was limited as was interaction with the content.

Today, faculty members are using learning management systems (LMS) as a means of posting course materials and conducting activities on the Web. Some of the more popular LMS include Blackboard, WebCT, Desire2Learn, and Angel. The benefit of using an LMS is that faculty members do not have to learn a special language and the systems are designed to effectively facilitate the management of online courses. Additionally, the tools available in LMS can be used to create a more engaging and interactive environment including blogging features, wikis, discussion boards, survey tools, and testing functions. Through the use of these tools faculty are able to create a more engaging learning environment where students can discuss the content and collaborate on projects along with participating in numerous other activities.

Unlike the face-to-face environment, the online environment requires more preparation and plan-

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