What do Graduate Learners Say about Instructor and Learner Discourse in their First Online Course? Part One

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Abstract

This study was grounded on the assumptions that Instructor and Learners Discourse (ILD) in Threaded Discussions (TDs) in online courses is of great importance to learners taking their first online course and that there is a correlation between instructor and learners discourse. This study recognized the importance of ILD for learners taking their first online courses and the vitality of the online learning institution. A quantitative path analysis, content analysis, and course evaluation surveys were used to conduct this study. Quantitative path analysis procedures were used to examine the direct hypothesized relationship between the extent of both instructor and learner discourse. Content analysis procedures were used to quantify ILD. A course evaluation survey included one open-ended question on discourse and provided further insight toward the nature of the quantitatively measured hypothesized relationship. The findings of this study suggest that there is a direct relationship between instructor and learner discourse in online courses. This relationship was of practical and statistical significance. The findings of this study suggest that ILD is of great importance to learners taking their first online course. Online administrators should expect instructors to facilitate ILD that is interactive, supportive, enjoyable, timely, helpful, encouraging, motivating, interesting, and engaging.

Introduction

Online institutions offer courses where asynchronous e-discussions are utilized by instructors and learners in order to facilitate learning. For the purpose of this study, Instructor and Learners Discourse (ILD) is defined as asynchronous e-discussions between instructors and learners in online courses. ILD has been conceptualized as an important success factor for learners taking their first online course.

ILD is a tool used for facilitating learning, teaching, and training. ILD assists instructors and learners in creating a virtual community where instructors inject knowledge and learners share teaching notes, expertise, ideas, and opinions. This study is grounded on the assumptions: a) ILD is a factor of great importance to learners taking their first online course and b) there is a correlation between ILD.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to contribute to the knowledge base about ILD in online courses. Specifically, this study was conducted to answer two research questions: a) what do graduate learners in education say about ILD in their first online course? and b) is

there a direct relationship between the extent of instructor discourse and the extent of learner discourse in online courses? Answers to these research questions may assist stakeholders of the online institution in developing pragmatic ILD strategies that focus on assisting learners taking their first online course. Answers to these research questions may have implications for course design and student retention.

The Research Problem

The institution of higher education is becoming an increasingly competitive marketplace. With minimal, if any, limitations imposed by time and place, the online institution is gaining considerable popularity among those seeking a higher education. Within this competitive marketplace of higher education, input from graduate learners in education regarding ILD in their first online courses is clearly a factor of great importance for the vitality of the online institution (i.e., student retention, satisfaction, and success).

Facilitating ILD may offer rich and diverse information and knowledge and give learners a sense of belonging and connectedness to their online courses. Facilitating ILD may provide opportunities for online learners taking their first online course to communicate and refine knowledge.

Modern online learners (e.g., Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Echo Boomers) may be seeking higher education through online courses offering sufficient ILD. Leaders of online universities need to assure learners that their organizations will provide the highest quality courses facilitated by qualified faculty members able to succeed in ILD in order to assist learners taking their first online course in succeeding online.

Review of the Literature

Kopf (2007) asserted that the online learning environment will grow into a $52.6 billion industry by 2010. According to Groth (2007), learners may show up at their computers determined to complete their online course. Taylor (2006) warned that it is imperative that administrators meet the ever-increasing demand for technologically advanced learning opportunities.

Paloff and Pratt (2007) and Yang and Cornelius (2005) have indicated that learner success in the online classroom may depend most on the competency of professors, especially those capable of creating a sense of community and emotional connection with learners. Sammons and Ruth (2007) asserted that the success of online education as a whole rests largely upon the motivations of online faculty who choose to assume this responsibility. Motivation may be based on the number of messages between instructors and learners (Chyung, 2007).

Leaders who can recruit and retain the most qualified and motivated instructors may be able more confidently to lead their institutions to success with their online offerings. Leaders of online universities should be concerned with vital aspects of hiring quality instructors as they strategize to develop and sustain the delivery of quality online courses

and programs (Kelly, 2006; Orlando & Poitrus, 2005). The most valuable assets of any institution of higher learning are the faculty members (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Faculty satisfaction ratings and retention are directly related to learner satisfaction ratings and retention (Baker, Redfield, & Tonkin, 2006; Kelly, 2006).

Leaders of online universities should embrace the challenges of extending online educational opportunities to learners who would otherwise be unable to access postsecondary learning (Calvert, 2005; Rhoda, 2005; Shea, Pickett, & Li, 2005). Noel-Levitz (2006) reported that communication is one of three top concerns online learners have involving the faculty member. White (2005) reported that adult learners may be disappointed when they are unable to accomplish the academic tasks required in higher education and this frustration could lead to disinterest and eventually withdrawing from courses.

Instructor and Learners Discourse

Given the aforementioned expectations, the trend of hiring competent online instructors able to effectively utilize ILD will continue. The roles of online instructors are multiple (i.e., intellectual, social, pedagogical, technical, and so forth). Online instructors may foster a sense of community among groups of learners through ILD by supporting learners to participate in Threaded Discussions (TD). The success of online courses may depend upon the extent of ILD where learners are assisted in developing academic, social, and critical thinking skills. ILD may provide opportunities for deep learning experiences.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded on the assumptions: a) ILD is a factor of great importance to learners taking their first online course and b) there is a correlation between instructor and learners discourse. Building on these assumptions, in conjunction with the existing research literature, this study recognizes the importance of ILD for a) learners taking their first online courses and b) the vitality of the online learning institution.

Research Methodology

This study's path analysis model is grounded on the theoretical and empirical research literature reviewed. A specific quantitative path analysis model was developed in order to test and analyze the direct hypothesized relationship between the extent of instructor discourse and the extent of learners discourse. Qualitative data collected from open-ended questions from a course evaluation survey were used to provide further insight toward any statistically significant relationships and/or differences found in the quantitative path analysis.

Research Design

The researcher used quantitative path analysis, content analysis, and course evaluation surveys to conduct this study. Quantitative path analysis procedures were used to examine the direct hypothesized relationship between the extent of instructor asynchronous discourse and the extent of learner asynchronous discourse. Content analysis procedures were used on the computer-mediated transcripts of TDs between instructors and learners within several graduate courses in education offered entirely online by an accredited institution of higher education. Course evaluation surveys were used to collect qualitative data of learners' opinions about instructor and learners discourse.

Content Analysis

The primary data source for this study was the computer-mediated transcripts generated by online learners and their course instructors as they participated in the asynchronous e-discourse component of their respective online course. With the inherent capacity to archive asynchronous e-discourse, computer-mediated transcripts provided an ideal means to identify and analyze the extent of asynchronous e-discourse exchanged among the participants in each of the online courses involved in this study. Content analysis procedures were used to analyze TDs posted by learners and instructors in order to quantify ILD (i.e., the extent of both instructor and learner discourse).

Course Evaluation Surveys

The participating online educational institution selected for this study requires learners to respond to course evaluation survey questions designed to assess learner perceptions of the administrative, technological, and instructional components of the online educational institution. Course evaluation survey questions included ratings of the online course and instructor, should learners recommend the online course to another person, and a question on learners' opinion about instructor and learners discourse. The researcher was interested in this last survey question. This open-ended course evaluation survey question was used to provide further insight toward the nature of the quantitatively measured hypothesized relationship (i.e., correlation between ILD) and the importance of ILD to learners taking their first online course.

Participants and Setting

The setting consisted of an online institution of higher education offering graduate level degree programs in education entirely online. The participating institution is: (a) accredited by the appropriate accrediting body; (b) there are no residency requirements; (c) all communications and interactions between learners and instructors take place online using email and TDs using the institutions' computer server; (d) instructors are required to participate in asynchronous e-discussion; and (e) learners are required to participate in asynchronous e-discussions contributing between 5% and 25% of each learner's final grade. A learner meets the course requirements on TDs by posting between one and three responses to each question posted by the instructor in each lesson or module of an online course.

Data Collection

The researcher collected the aforementioned data from the online databases of the participating online institution of higher education. Specifically, the online databases contained copies of the threaded discussions. The researcher selected randomly 75% of the TDs. The collected data were saved into a text file which was edited to ensure learner and instructor anonymity. The edited data were saved into one database file in order to perform content analysis.

Data Analysis

In this study's quantitative path analysis model, both learner and instructor discourse were continuous variables. Descriptive statistics were performed in order to compute the learner n size and the extent of learner discourse (number of learner postings), and the instructor n size and the extent of instructor discourse (number of instructor postings). Descriptive statistics were also performed to compute the mean and standard deviation of the number of learner postings and the number of instructor postings.

A path coefficient may report the relative strengths or weaknesses of the extent of instructor discourse on the extent of learner discourse. Path coefficients for the relationship between learner postings and instructor postings with $\alpha = .05$ and $p < .05$ for statistical significance were calculated. The extent of instructor discourse was the predictor variable and the extent of learner discourse was the criterion variable.

Research Results

Quantitative Data

Based on the content analysis, there were 14 instructors and 249 learners. The content analysis revealed 169 instructor e-postings and 1,014 learner e-postings. With these numbers, this study's sample size was $n = 263$ participants and the total number of e-postings posted by both instructors and learners was 1,183.

Table 1 presents the descriptive data for ILD. It includes the mean level and corresponding SD. The number of learner e-postings represents the extent of asynchronous learner discourse. The number of instructor e-postings represents the extent of asynchronous instructor discourse.

Table 1
Descriptive Data for Instructor and Learner Discourse

	n Size	Number of e-postings	M(SD)	
Instructors	14	169	12.07	(9.042)
Learners	249	1,014	72.43	(32.517
Total	263	1,183	16.04788 (5.00)	

The relationship between the number of instructor e-postings and the number of learner e-postings was found to be of statistical significance. The Pearson Correlation value for the relationship between the extent of learner discourse and the extent of instructor discourse was found to be $r = .763(**)$ where $* = p < .05$; $** = p < .01$ level (2-tailed). The correlation coefficient was positive and statistically significant. Correlation coefficients of determination indicated that this relationship was of practical significance (the variance in the extent of learner postings was associated with the extent of instructor postings). The R square change was .582 with F = 16.695 significant at $p = .002$. Thus, the data analysis indicated that this direct relationship was both of statistical and practical significance.

The relationship between the extent of instructor discourse and the extent of learner discourse in online courses was found to be of statistical significance ($r = .763$, $p < .01$). The direct effect of the extent of instructor discourse on the extent of learner discourse measured the same relationship as the correlation between these two variables (instructor discourse and learner discourse). The path coefficient for this path segment was identical to the correlation coefficient for these two variables ($\beta = .763$, $p < .01$).

Qualitative Data

In order to provide further insights toward the implications of the quantitative findings and strengthen possible interpretations, the researcher collected the responses to the last course survey question on learners' opinions about instructor and learners discourse. Survey responses to this question were transcribed and saved into a database for analysis. Exact quotes are presented within double quotation marks as excerpts. Common keywords are italicized in the excerpts.

"This was my first online course. Online discussions were *encouraging*. The sense of isolation diminished as I became more *motivated* and confident. Thanks to the ongoing *communication* and encouragement from Dr. … All questions and concerns about the course were answered in a *timely* as well as in a *supportive* manner. Dr. … certainly has the talent to know how to *engage* learners to become comfortable in sharing weaknesses and concerns without feeling inadequate in their academic knowledge."

" We always had such *interesting discussions*, and I learn so much from the online discussions. I look forward to *continuing* with online learning. This was my first online course."

"As a newbie, I've enjoyed the *discussions* in this class and learned so much more than I thought I would! I am thinking of taking the next course offered online next term because of my *enjoyment* in this course. I would like to thank Dr. … for his remarks during the course. I have found the course discussions extremely useful with respect to my current job."

"Dr. … has been an *inspiration* and an excellent *mentor* in this course which was my first online course. It was a pleasure having her as a professor for this class. I was very *motivated* by her strategies about moderating our weekly discussions. Thank you Dr. … very much for all of the *help* you offered me over the length of the course. Also, thanks for your efforts and *timely replies* to my postings."

"Thank you for your continuous *encouragement* throughout the course. I've been out of school for many years and could have not succeeded without your words of encouragement and our online discussions. Thanks for your *support* and prompt *feedback* during this class."

"It was a wonderful first online experience. It was a pleasure taking the course with Dr. ... I was very impressed with his valuable and motivating *feedback*, and obvious willingness to *help* students. I appreciate his assistance and felt comfortable using the discussion board. I appreciate his exceptional promptness in posting to the discussion board. He always answered my questions *promptly* and *thoroughly*."

"I received timely *feedback* that brings me so much joy to read her wonderful and encouraging comments. I will continue to do my best in the next online course. I must say this it is so refreshing to have a professor who I can *communicate* with and address any concerns. Thanks for everything."

"I haven't been in school for quite some time and I learned that I can still learn! I am looking forward to the rest of my online courses, and I have this class to thank for that. It was little uneasy for me to take an online course. Your *assistance* helped me a lot. I very much appreciate all the *motivation*, *suggestions*, and *support* you offered during the online discussions. Although the online discussions were a totally new field for me, I found online discussions very interesting. Thanks!"

"I have been self-employed for 19 years and have wanted to go back to school for several years. Online is new to me. Thanks so much for your friendliness, patience, and your quick responses! I have enjoyed the discussion board and appreciate all of the feedback. This has been an excellent online learning experience. Thank you!"

"The online discussions were wonderful and have learned and started applying in my career and personal life as well. I would like to thank you for your *support* and I am looking forward to take future online courses. I started this class a little nervous because I'd never taken online courses!"

"Thank you very much for your timely response to assignment submissions. Thanks for a great course!! I'm pleasantly surprised at the amount of information I've been taught in only eight weeks. I appreciate the effective *learning community* and environment you have created through the discussion board. Thanks for your positive *feedback*, compliments, and highly *motivating* comments. I enjoyed the online discussions very much"

Graduate learners in education taking their first online courses reported that ILD assisted them in developing successful learning skills online through TDs. Learners reported that instructors encouraged and motivated them to participate in e-discussions. As a result, learners asked questions and the instructors' responses helped them stay focused and engaged throughout the course. Learners reported that interaction between the instructor and learners was a determining factor of satisfaction with their first online course. Learners reported that they valued the instructor's support during the course. The aforementioned qualitative data excerpts indicate that ILD is important to graduate learners taking their first online course. ILD was interactive, supportive, enjoyable, timely, helpful, encouraging, motivating, interesting, and engaging.

Interpretations and Implications for Policy and Practice

The findings of this study suggest that there is a direct relationship between the extent of instructor discourse and the extent of learner discourse in online courses. These findings suggest that learners participate more in ILD when instructors post timely and frequently to the discussion board. These findings also suggest that the role and commitment of online instructors in prompting learner discourse is important to graduate learners taking their first online course. ILD is clearly a factor of great importance to learners.

Policy makers, administrators, and faculty may wish to use the findings of this study in order to develop pragmatic ILD strategies and operational activities. Online instructors need to facilitate ILD that are interactive, supportive, enjoyable, timely, helpful, encouraging, motivating, interesting, and engaging. As a result, online course administrators may achieve greater enrollment and retention rates in online courses by encouraging and supporting ILD in TDs.

Limitations of the Study

In conjunction with this research study's assumptions, there are some limitations to this study that may limit its generalizability to other research settings. The findings of this study may not be generalizable to the entire spectrum of online learners. The results may be indicative of only the responding sample and boundaries of this population of online learners. The constructs of this study were analyzed at a given point in time while dynamic technological changes can occur in the online learning environment. This research study did not develop an instrument for evaluating a policy on ILD in TDs or for measuring learner satisfaction or success with the asynchronous online learning systems.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that there is a direct relationship between instructor and learner discourse in online courses. This relationship was of practical and statistical significance. ILD is clearly a factor of great importance to learners taking their first online course. Stakeholders of the online institution should support the facilitation of ILD. Online administrators should expect instructors to facilitate ILD that are interactive, supportive, enjoyable, timely, helpful, encouraging, motivating, interesting, and

engaging. These findings contribute to a better understanding of ILD leading to learner success, satisfaction, and retention.

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