

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

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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.

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.

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.

Research Results

Quantitative Data

- 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)

Research Results

- 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 Analysis

- 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."

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.

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.