Comparison of Power Relations Within Electronic and Face-to-Face Classroom Discussions: A Case Study

Laurel Jeris
Northern Illinois University. USA

Comparison of Power Relations Within Electronic and Face-to-Face Classroom Discussions: A Case Study

Laurel Jeris
Northern Illinois University. USA

Abstract: Numerous aspects of design and delivery of online instruction are well researched but little exists on power relations of electronic versus face-to-face discussions and consequences for learning. This case study centers on the experiences of participants in a graduate course in human resource management. Implications for reconsidering prevailing views of adult education are discussed.

The use of technology-enhanced courses associated with the Internet is an increasingly popular delivery option throughout formal systems of higher education, and is anticipated to be the primary mode of instruction for adult part-time students by 2010 (Simerly, 1999). Although numerous aspects of this phenomenon have been investigated, adults' subjective experiences of electronically mediated discussion as the primary "classroom" interaction mode have received less attention (Daley, 1999; Miller, 2001). This paper explores how time and space, significantly altered through electronic mediation, affect the power relations among students and between students and faculty. It differs from other recent work on closely related questions (Holt, 1998; Rheingold, 1994) in that students enrolled in the online section never participated in any face-to-face interaction.

Theoretical Framework

According to Brookfield, "Democratic discussion holds a central place in the pantheon of practices comprising the progressive-humanist orthodoxy that reigns in adult education. . . . Politically, discussion is supposed to provide an analog of democratic process, a space where all voices are heard and respected in equal measure" (2001, p.206). These assumptions, along with an explicit preference for learner-centered instructional strategies in which learners actively construct their knowledge through these strategies, guided my course development and delivery. However, I was curious to see in what ways the power relations of the online classroom would change in the absence of the disciplinary elements of a set meeting schedule, classroom routines, and institutional setting (Foucault, 1979, 1980).

Miller (2001) characterized the discourses on new instructional technologies as congregating in dichotomous perspectives, utopian and dystopian. Proponents of Internet delivery describe it as personally empowering to users through greater flexibility, choice, and control of the content and process of learning. Critics are concerned that expanding adoption "will serve to increase the gap between information-rich and -poor and to dehumanize education, putting learners at risk of being more easily controlled and manipulated" (Miller, 2001, p. 188). Socially structured power

relations are evident in this critical perspective. Like all dichotomies, these views preclude the possibility of common membership.

Recently, Cervero and Wilson (2001) framed adult education as "the struggle for knowledge and power" and, along with numerous scholars in the field, explored this struggle using their own experiences against the backdrop of three orientations to adult education. These are: the "political is personal," which focuses on the adult learner as the subject; the "political is practical" focusing on the ability to get things done within existing power relationships; and finally, the "political is structural" where the vision lies in the goal to redistribute power (Cervero and Wilson, 2001, pp. 1-2). Each of these strands suggests a separate direction for analysis of this case. Although a review of these perspectives influenced the development of three research questions, they were not used to channel the analysis toward any single strand.

Research Questions

1. Given a choice of delivery options (traditional and online), what factors contributed to the students' selection of each option?
2. In what ways were power and privilege expressed differently online and on campus?
3. In what ways did the electronic mediation of time and space alter the learning experience of adult graduate students?

Hopefully, the results and discussion will reveal that teaching and learning screen-to-screen, when compared to face-to-face, is neither a Garden of Eden nor a repressive, thoughtless place that manipulates and destroys people. Not unlike classroom-based instruction, there is potential for either possibility.

Methodology

The case-study tradition (Creswell, 1998) was selected from among the other qualitative traditions such as biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, and ethno-graphy. Merriam (1998) indicated that case-study design is normally employed to gain understanding and meaning from a given situation, rather than to test a certain set of variables. Discovery is its main utility rather than confirmation. Yin (1989) indicated that case study is particularly useful to research questions involving "how" and "why" (p. 19). At the completion of the course, 945 individual student comments from asynchronous electronic discussions, individual student profiles, and post-course reflections were available for analysis. No written record of the on campus group discussions was made, but small group work from five major cases covered throughout the course were tape recorded and transcribed. Individual student profiles and post-course reflections were preserved from the on campus group as well. The cases provided focal points, a set of critical incidences, within the case study for comparison of the two groups' experiences. The Data Analysis Spiral (Creswell, 1998, p.143) was selected as the qualitative analysis approach, which is generally manageable for one researcher with the aid of research peers and member checks for critiquing the analysis to enhance the dependability and confirmability of the study data, methods, and findings.

The Site

In defining the social space occupied by the institution offering these programs, several features are important to note. This small, private, Catholic Franciscan University's mission includes the phrase "without walls." In practice this has meant site-based development for nearly thirty years throughout the United States; taking adult degree completion and graduate programs to eighteen states where the regulatory environment and student need forged an invitation to establish a presence. From an administrative perspective, years of experience in site-based distance education made this institution's leap to Internet delivery relatively painless. An infrastructure was in place to serve students at a distance and the culture adapted quickly to accommodate students through toll free numbers, extended service hours, and technical support.

The Sample

Table 1 displays student profiles according to program-of-study and gender.

Table 1
Program of Study by Gender and Section

	Female on campus	Female online	Male on campus	Male online
MBA		3	8	
MS in Management	1	8	4	1
MS in HRD		2	1	

Of the 13 women enrolled in the online section, 9 cited near term pregnancy or recent childbirth as the most significant factor in their choice. The one male in the online section was pursuing the entire MBA degree online because he lived in another state. Interestingly, 6 on campus males also cited recent births as a decision factor. The on campus section was the preferred option for these students because the classroom itself and time on campus before and after class offered, "space to think and study without all the chaos." Apparently, 15 of the 28 students enrolled on campus and online selected their section based on physical access to their preferred learning environment. The remaining 13 students cited numerous reasons for their section selection ranging from a desire to experiment with the online format to "I need the structure of a weekly class meeting to get my work done."

Results and Discussion

In response to the first research question, the online option responded to the expressed need of mothers to remain physically close to their infants while studying, and the on campus section met the need for some fathers to distance themselves from their infants while pursuing their coursework. From the view of the individual learner (political is personal), presenting an online delivery option appeared to create opportunities for learning that may have been historically unavailable. This plausible, seemingly value-neutral conclusion fails to take into account Cunningham's (2000) critique in which she stated, "much of the field's rhetoric centers on *the*

learner, as if the learners are disembodied creatures and as if the social context, the social structures, the social class in which we all exist do not affect the process of education" (p.573). This critique enables a number of practical issues and problems inherent within online delivery to come to the foreground for analysis.

For example, by numerous criteria, this institution got a lot of things right in terms of technical and instructional support for students and faculty. However, the online students were far more active in online threaded discussions from Friday afternoon to Monday morning with over 65% of the contributions occurring during the midnight to 3:00 AM period of those three days. Because the online course software recorded the time and duration of the discussion entry, it functioned as a type of electronic surveillance and made this data available to all participants, to me, to the system manager, and to the technical support staff. From the students and my perspectives' this activity pattern indicated some staffing adjustments were needed to provide better weekend coverage. The institution did not have a 24/7 technical support policy but promised students that system-related problems would be remedied within six hours. Maintaining this standard for the online group met with considerable resistance because, as a result of the electronic surveillance, the students' needs were considered a low priority. The institutional view was that these were stay-at-home moms who could get online anytime; the institution should not have to incur additional labor costs for a "trivial" need. This response to a particular group of students was a stunning example of the defining characteristics of the "political is practical" domain. According to Cervero and Wilson, "It is important to note that this definition of politics as the ability to get things done takes the existing relations of power in the organizational or social setting as acceptable, or at least unchangeable. . . (1) its [political as practical] definition of power is narrowly focused along individual lines, and (2) its largely unprincipled attention to the "how to" of politics leaves aside issues of "what for " (2001, p. 7). No ethical analysis followed this incident and no institutional consideration of the politics or ethics of electronic surveillance ensued. The individual and practical perspectives reigned and my students and I were marginalized. I was labeled as "very touchy" that semester and word went out not to "mess" with my course or my students. The "political is structural" standpoint was not engaged to examine the hegemonic forces at play in the online delivery system.

In regard to the second research question, the screen-to-screen discussions were all asynchronous. Consequently, the quality and quantity of students' comments with one another differed greatly in the two sections. Except during small group work, student comments on campus tended to be directed to me. Case study groups and team presentations helped to alter this dynamic somewhat but true dialog was illusive. Online asynchronous discussions offered a refreshing change. In them students responded to questions or themes initially and then commented on subsequent postings throughout a discussion period. Each week the topic changed in this course but all contributions were saved so that students could reflect on previous discussions. Not only was the quantity of student-to-student comments much greater in the online section, but students also remarked that the time to think through responses in an asynchronous discussion was beneficial. Comments included quotes from course materials and numerous other secondary sources, as well as references to previous student comments. In her end-of-term reflections, one online student remarked, "You can't hide online. The only way to attend class is to participate. This has been a completely different learning experience for me because I probably haven't spoken up in front of the class more than five times during my whole

program and this is my last class!" In relation to this comment, another student remarked, "I was so embarrassed by something stupid I said during my first MBA class that I made up my mind right then, I was not going to say another word. If it hadn't been for this class, I would have kept that promise." Several students wanted to know why this student decided what she said was stupid. She revealed that her comment was pronounced "utterly ignorant" by a male classmate who was also a professional colleague in a more senior position.

Additional evidence of the ways in which the online environment affected course outcomes appeared in written assignments whose guidelines were the same for both sections and encouraged the use of student comments. Out of the 70 assignments submitted throughout the term on campus, two papers included references to class discussions and specific quotes. Surprisingly, the 70 online papers included 174 quotes from the online discussions. There were also many more student quotes in the assignments from the online section than from the on campus group. On campus students quoted me 24 times in their papers, and online students quoted me 14 times, but with 2 exceptions, quotes from me were linked to responses from one or two other students. This evidence, when coupled with the more dialogic quality of the online discussions leads to consideration of the third research question: In what ways did the electronic mediation of time and space alter the learning experience of these adult graduate students?

Of the 945 online comments, only 67 of these comments were initially directed to me. Transcripts of the audiotapes from on campus small group discussions revealed 478 student-to-student comments. No formal records were kept throughout the semester of student-to teacher questions and comments in the on campus section, but one student did tally these interactions during three class sessions when case presentations were made; an average of 17 comments per session were directed to me. I redirected all but 2 of these to the team presenting the case. Hence, the disciplinary elements of a physical classroom space and specific allocations of time for class meetings seemed to preserve the panoptic character of classroom interaction. As Foucault noted, "It is spaces that provide fixed positions and permit circulation; they carve out individual segments and establish operational obedience of individuals" (1979, p.148). An inference from these data is that online instruction, in turning over control of instructional time and space to the student, altered the disciplinary power of classrooms and teacher-controlled learning agendas. It appeared to traverse the spectrum of the three political strands of personal, practical, and structural by shifting control of the location and timing of learner to the student.

From a more interpretive perspective, the women in the on campus section were far more likely to share anecdotes about a spouse's (or another male family member's) work experience than their own. Although the women in both sections were employed, with some on maternity leave, those in the online section rarely mentioned work experiences other than their own or those of other female colleagues. As political theorist Elshtain noted, "Women are left with few apparent options: to acquiesce in their historic loss of symbolic-domestic authority; to manipulate their diminished social role as mothers inside of increasingly powerless families; or to join forces with men, assuming masculine roles and identities and competing for power on established, institutionalized terms" (1991, p.144). The possibility exists that the few women in the on campus section felt more secure in revealing their versions of male work experiences as a way of participating with less personal risk; they competed for air time but mainly offered supporting rather than contradictory documentation.

Conclusions and Implications for Research

This analysis revealed that the online course section offered students opportunities to regulate themselves differently from their colleagues in a traditional setting. Online students appeared to examine their own assumptions and those of their classmates about the relationship between identity and specific responses to course topics and issues. In other words, the individual experience, practical issues of negotiating a course, and structural experiments in the redistribution of traditional power relations within adult classroom settings were evident in the students' comments from the online sections to a much greater extent than from the on campus groups. However, prior to teaching online and pursuing this research, I would have responded very differently to Cervero's persistent question to the field, "Who Benefits?" (2001). I, like many of my colleagues, viewed online course delivery primarily as an institutional marketing strategy with the explicit goal of increasing enrollment - a survival tactic for tuition-driven small private colleges. Holding strongly to that belief crowded out other possible ramifications, as well as potential benefits and consequences for adults via online instruction. Cervero and Wilson stated ". . . the adult learners we work with have to be understood relationally within the particular material, social, and political locations of their participation, not as some generic precipitate of research or imagined embodiment of ideological wishful thinking" (2001, p. 268). To that end, questions for further study are, To what extent does Internet delivery precipitate de *facto* segregation of participants along lines of race, class, and gender? And, in what ways is teacher power expressed differently online and in class?

References

Brookfield, S. D. (2001). A political analysis of discussion groups: Can the circle be unbroken? In R. M. Cervero, & A. L. Wilson (Eds.), *Power in Practice: Adult Education and the Struggle for Knowledge and Power in Society* (pp. 206-225). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cervero, R. M. & Wilson, A. L (Eds.). (2001). *Power in practice: Adult education and the struggle for knowledge and power in society.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Creswell, J. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among the traditions.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Cunningham, P, M. (2000). A sociology of adult education. In A. L. Wilson & E. R. Hayes (Eds.), *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (pp. 573-591). San Francisco: Joseey-Bass.

Daley, B. J. (2000). Learning human resource development through electronic discussion. In K. P. Kuchinke (Ed.), *Academy of Human Resource Development Conference Proceedings.* (pp. 25-31). Raleigh-Durham, NC: AHRD.

Elshtain, J. B. (1991). The power and powerlessness of women. In, Elshtain, J.B. (Ed), *Power Trips and Other*.

Journeys: Essays in Feminism as Civic Discourse (pp. 134-148). Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press

Foucault, M. (1979). *Discipline & punish: The birth of the prison.* Alan Sheridan trans. New York: Random House.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings* 1972-1977. Colin Gordon, et al., trans. New York: Pantheon.

Holt, M., Kleiber, P., Swenson, J., Rees, R. F., & Milton, J. (1998). Facilitating group learning on the internet. In B. Cahoon (Ed.), *Adult Learning and the Internet: New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 78, (43-51) San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

Merriam, S. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miller, N. (2001). The politics of access and communication: Using distance learning technologies. In R. M. Cervero, & A. L. Wilson (Eds.), *Power in Practice: Adult Education and the Struggle for Knowledge and Power in Society* (pp. 187-205). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rheingold, H. (1994). *The virtual community: Finding connections in a computerized world.* London: Secker & Warburg.

Simerly, R. G. (1999). Providing leadership for technology enhanced education: The challenge of institutional macro change. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, 47 (1), 40-48.

Yin, R. (1989). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.