Gender Difference in Online Discussions: What's Happening in that Space

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Abstract: *The purpose of this paper was to examine the nature of the online discussion that male and female adult learners created in a specific online learning setting. This purpose was guided by the following research question: To what extent can manifestations of power be explained by personal characteristics of students?*

Gender differences have been documented in groups as diverse as teams at work or self-help groups, in professional meetings or informal discussions (Postmes & Spears, 2002). Discussion is usually considered as a powerful tool for the development of pedagogic skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, and reflection as well as for the improvement of democratic communication. Based on his experience as a learner or a facilitator in a discussion group, Brookfield (2001) underscores that unless adult educators create a space for those voices that would otherwise be excluded by default, discussion reproduces structures of inequity based on race, class, and gender that exist in the wider society. As Wilson and Cervero (2001) point out, the systems of power that structure all action in the world are an inescapable facet of social reality and usually asymmetrical in that they privilege some people and disadvantage others. Although there is a body of literature that discusses the types of interaction or the factors influencing interaction in online discussions for adult learners, there has been a lack of research that specifically examines the nature and structure of online discussions that adult learners create.

The purpose of this paper was to examine the nature of the online discussion that male and female adult learners created in a specific online learning setting. This purpose was guided by the following research question: To what extent can manifestations of power be explained by personal characteristics of students?

In this study, the researcher used critical discourse analysis (CDA) as research methodology. Dijk (1998) says that CDA is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. Most significantly, it offers the opportunity to adopt a social perspective in the cross-cultural study of media texts (Dellinger, 1995). In short, socially situated speakers and writers produce texts and the relations of participants in producing texts are not always equal: there will be a range from complete solidarity to complete inequality (Dellinger, 1995). For the difference analysis in gender the researcher used power the following indicators: Verbosity, postings, length of comments, and citation by others.

The online class selected for this study was a graduate level course in a professional school at a large state university in the northern United States in Fall 2003. The student group was relatively small (11 students, 3 males and 8 females). The online course contained 13 units and employed mixed-sex small group discussions in each of the learning units. More specifically, individuals participating in the class were expected to take leadership roles in moderating the online discussion. Members of the two small groups were asked to conduct their own discussion about topics and issues for the weekly assignments, beginning with the questions posed by the moderators for the topic (two moderators for each unit). Ultimately, there were a total of 906 postings made in the course over the span of the semester.

I needed a way to conceptualize how power manifests itself in text-based, online discussion. After experimenting with numerous possible measures, I ultimately settled on four indicators (see Table 1) as indicators of power in online communication.

Table 1

Conceptualizing Power

Indicators	Rationale	Operationalization
Verbosity	The more a person writes, the more s/he demands attention from the other learners.	Total number of words in transcript
Postings	The more times a person posts a message, the more times s/he demands the attention.	Total number of postings in the discussion bulletin board
Length of Comments	The longer each posting is, the more sustained attention demanded of other learners.	Total number of words/total number of postings
Citation by Others	The more times a person has her/his written words cited by others, the more times s/he demands the attention.	Total number of postings which received responses from others

In the current study, I assume that a person who has more words is more powerful than those who have fewer words; verbosity, postings, and length of comments are chosen as the indicators for the power language use. The studies conducted by Dovidio, Ellyson, Keating, Heltman, and Brown (1988), Postmes and Spears (2002), and Tisdell (1993) support this assumption. Citation by others can be defined as the number of postings that receive responses from others. A person who has more citations by others is more powerful than those who have fewer citations by others (Jun & Park, 2003).

To test the research question, I conducted the Mann-Whitney U test using SPSS 12.0, using gender as the independent variable. The Mann-Whitney U test is the nonparametric substitute for the independent two samples t-test when the assumption of normality is not valid.

As seen in Table 2, the results of the Mann-Whitney U test show that there were no statistically significant differences in the use of powerful languages between the male and the female groups through all four indicators of power at a significance level of .05.

Table 2

Differences Between the Male and the Female Groups on Powerful Language Use

Indicators	Male (n = 3)		Female (n = 8)		Mann-Whitney U	Z	p
	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks			
Verbosity	6.33	19.00	5.88	47.00	11.00	-.204	.921
Postings	7.33	22.00	5.50	44.00	8.00	-.816	.497
Length of comments	6.00	18.00	6.00	48.00	12.00	.000	1.000
Citation by others	6.50	19.50	5.81	46.50	10.50	-.308	.776

The results of this study indicate that there were no statistically significant differences in the use of powerful languages based on gender. The findings suggest the possibility that the online discussion environment attenuates the power of gender-based privilege.