Instructor and Learner Discourse in MBA and MA Online Programs: Whom Posts more Frequently?

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Abstract: This study was grounded on the assumptions that (a) Instructor and Learners Discourse (ILD) in Threaded Discussions (TDs) in online courses is of great importance to both MBA and MA learners; (b) there is a correlation between instructor and learners discourse; and (c) there is a difference in the frequency of postings between MBA and MA learners. This researcher recognized the importance of ILD for both learners taking online courses and the vitality of the online university. 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 MBA and MA instructor and MBA and MA 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 and MBA instructors and learners posted more frequently that MA instructors and learners. This relationship was of practical and statistical significance. Administrators of online universities should develop and implement policies on expectations for instructors to facilitate ILD in the online learning environment.

Introduction

Instructors of online courses utilize asynchronous e-discussions 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 a factor affecting learning in the online learning environment. It is an educational interactive tool between instructors and learners. Instructors use ILD to facilitate learning, teaching, and training through the development of virtual communities where instructors deliver the assigned curriculum and learners share teaching notes, expertise, ideas, and opinions.

Purpose

The purpose of this research was to contribute to the knowledge base about ILD in online courses at the masters academic level. Specifically, this study was conducted to answer the following research question. Whom posts more frequently in MBA and MA programs during Instructor and Learner Discourse? Answers to this research question may (a) assist stakeholders of the online university in developing pragmatic ILD policies that focus on assisting learners in taking online courses; and (b) have implications for course design, online student retention, and accreditation.

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 universities are gaining considerable popularity among those seeking a higher education. Within this competitive marketplace of higher education, ILD between instructors and learners in both MA in education and MBA in online courses is clearly a factor of great importance for the vitality of the online university (i.e., student retention, satisfaction, and success).

Review of the current literature revealed the need to research ILD frequency in order to: (a) offer rich and valuable information to scholars and stakeholders of online universities on course design, online student retention, and university accreditation; (b) develop policies on ILD frequency expectations of postings during asynchronous e-discussions for online courses per academic degree program; and (c) assist learners in developing a sense of belonging and connectedness to their online courses. Researching ILD frequency will generate new knowledge on course design focusing on expectations for online learners to interact with peers and instructors in order to master the course content.

Modern online masters-level 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 courses are taught by instructors whom successfully facilitate ILD.

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 instructors, 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 posted between instructors and learners in online courses (Chyung, 2007).

Leaders of online universities who can recruit and retain the most qualified and motivated instructors may be able more confidently to lead universities to success with their online offerings. Such leaders should be concerned with the 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 asset of any university is 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 online instructors. 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 the withdrawal from courses.

Instructor and Learners Discourse

Given the aforementioned expectations, the trend of hiring competent online instructors able to effectively facilitate ILD will continue. The roles of online instructors continue to be multiple (i.e., intellectual, social, pedagogical, technical, and so forth). Online instructors need to 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 analytical and thinking skills. ILD may provide learners with opportunities for deep learning experiences through interactions with instructors and peers.

Conceptual Framework

This study was grounded on the assumptions that: (a) ILD is a factor of great importance to the online universities, MBA and MA instructors, and MBA and MA learners; (b) there is a correlation between instructors and learners postings during asynchronous e-discussions in online courses; and (c) the number of postings posted by instructors and learners varies with respect to the online courses and programs (i.e., there is a difference in the frequency of postings between MBA and MA learners). Building on these assumptions, in conjunction with the existing research literature, this researcher recognized the importance of ILD for a) learners taking online courses and b) the vitality of the online universities.

Research Methodology

This study's path analysis model was 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-level courses in education and business offered entirely online by an online university. Course evaluation surveys were used to collect qualitative data of learners' perceptions 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 courses. 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 university 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 university. 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 in ILD) and the importance of ILD to learners taking online courses.

Participants and Setting

The setting consisted of a university offering masters-level degree programs in both education and business entirely online. Specifically, the participating online university offers MBA and MA in Education with specialization in Educational Technology. The participating university: (a) is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and is a member of the North Central Association; (b) has no residency requirements; (c) utilizes a computer server for all communications and interactions between learners and instructors that take place online using email and TDs for the duration of each online course; (d) requires instructors to participate in asynchronous e-discussions; (e) requires learners to participate at least twice in asynchronous e-discussions; and (f) learners receive a grade for TD participation that counts between 5% and 25% of the final grade.

Data Collection

Data were collected from the online course database of the participating online university. Specifically, the online database contained copies of all TDs (Threaded Discussions) per unit of each course. The duration of each course was eight weeks. Each course consisted of eight discussions.

The researcher selected all the MBA and MA in educational technology online courses offered in an academic term. The online course database of the participating online university contained per course: (a) the number of postings posted by each instructor; (b) the number of postings posted by each student; (c) the gender of each student; (d) the final grade of each student; (e) the course code; (f) instructors' and learners' IDs. A final letter grade "A" is assigned by an instructor when the final numeric grade is between 90% and 100%. A final letter grade "B" is assigned for a final numeric grade between 80% and 89%. A final letter grade "C" is assigned for a final numeric grade between 70% and 79%. A final grade of "F" is assigned for a final numeric grade between 0% and 69%. The administrator responsible for research provided this researcher with the following data per course without revealing names of instructors and learners: (a) instructor postings; (b) learner postings; (c) the gender of each learner ("1" for Male and "2" for Female); and (d) the final letter grade of each student ("1" for "A", "2" for "B", "3" for "C", and "4" for "F"). The collected data were entered into SPSS 16.0 for analysis.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were performed in order to compute the number of learners and their extent of learner discourse (number of learner postings), and the number of instructors and the extent of their discourse (number of instructor postings) per online course in both the MBA and MA in Educational technology degree programs. A quantitative path analysis model was used to analyze the data collected for the variables: (a) learner discourse, (b) instructor discourse, (c) learner gender, and (d) final grade. 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 α = .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, the descriptive data for ILD are presented in Table 1 which include 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. Instructor discourse was the independent variable. Learner discourse was the dependent variable.

Table 1. Descriptive Data for Instructor and Learner Discourse

	Number of Learners	M(SD)
MBA Instructors		9.93 (4.083)
MBA Learners	178	5.84 (3.441)
MA Instructors		6.72 (2.241)
MA Learners	213	4.04 (2.384)

The mean difference between MBA and MA instructors' postings to the discussion board was 3.21 indicating that MBA instructors posted more frequently than MA instructors. The mean difference between MBA and MA learners' postings to the discussion board was 1.8 indicating that MBA learners posted more frequently than MA learners.

The relationship between the number of MBA instructor e-postings and the number of MBA 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 = .748(**) where * = $p < .05$; ** = $p < .01$ level (1-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 .557 with *F* = 223.515 significant at $p = .000$. Thus, this direct relationship was both of statistical and practical significance. The relationship between the extent of MBA instructor discourse and the extent of MBA learner discourse in online courses was found to be of statistical significance ($r = .748$; $p < .01$). 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 ($\beta = .748$; $p < .01$).

The relationship between the number of MA instructor e-postings and the number of MA 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 $r = .433(**)$ where $* = p < .05$; $** = p < .01$ level (1-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 .188 with $F = 223.515$ significant at $p = .000$. Thus, the data analysis indicated that this direct relationship was both of statistical and practical significance. The relationship between the extent of MA instructor discourse and the extent of MA learner discourse in online courses was found to be of statistical significance ($r = .433$; $p < .01$). 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 ($\beta = .433$; $p < .01$).

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.

"Online discussions were necessary in the MBA courses"

"As a manager, I learned to share ideas through instructor and learners discourse"

"All questions related to the MBA course were answered in a timely matter during our instructor and learners discourse"

"I have found instructor and learners discourse extremely useful"

" instructor and learners discourse lead to interesting discussions"

"I've enjoyed the discussions in this MA class"

"I learned more than I thought I would in my MA online course through instructor and learners discourse"

" instructor and learners discourse encourages team effort"

"instructor and learners discourse was ideal for prompt feedback"

"I felt comfortable using the discussion board"

"I have enjoyed the discussion board"

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 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. ILD is clearly a factor of great importance to learners. MBA instructors posted more frequently than MA instructors and as a result their students posted more frequently to the discussion board.

Policy makers, administrators, and faculty may wish to use the findings of this study in order to develop pragmatic policies on the frequency of ILD. Online instructors need to facilitate ILD. Online course administrators may achieve greater enrollment and retention rates in online courses by 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 finding of this study is that there was a direct relationship between instructor and learner discourse in MBA and MA online courses. This relationship was of practical and statistical significance. MBA instructors posted more frequently than MA instructors and as a result MBA learners posted more frequently to the discussion board. ILD is clearly a factor of importance to learners taking online course. Stakeholders of the online university should support the facilitation of ILD and develop pragmatic policies on the frequency of ILD in order to achieve greater enrollment and retention rates in online courses through learner success and satisfaction in the online learning environment.

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