LET’S TAKE A LOOK INSIDE DISCUSSION BOARDS

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SIDLIT
Tools / Trends / Challenges
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About the Presenter

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Statements of Problem and Purpose

• While many institutions are delivering anything from an online course to full online degree programs, little is known about the patterns of communication that takes place inside online discussion boards, along with the power dynamics observed in this communication.

• The purpose of this research is to examine the nature of the patterns of communication of discussion board users in undergraduate distance education courses and add to the existing body of research involving the creation and development of online discussion boards in online courses. More particularly, it is to differentiate the patterns, power struggles, and significant meaning behind the language presented through the discussion board threads.

• Useful for faculty, administrators, instructional design staff
Rationale

• “over 5.8 million fall 2014 distance education students” (Allen et al., 2015, p.4)

• For the fall 2014 data "there are nearly five times as many undergraduate enrollments (4,862,519) as graduate enrollments (966,307) among students taking at least one distance education course” (Allen et al., 2015, p.17)

• Research is needed for the undergraduate population as they are the majority population taking online courses.
Conceptual Framework

Research Questions

1. What is the nature of the patterns of communication inside the discussion boards?

2. Does the structure of the language that is used by students in online discussion boards create and/or maintain power relationships? If so, how and to what extent?

3. Are the verbal interactions that are present in online discussion boards reflective of various social and historical factors? If so, how and to what extent?
Theoretical Foundation and Methodology

- Critical Discourse Analysis
  - Social constructivism
  - discourse produces power

- Fairclough Three-Dimensional framework
  - Text - turn-taking, ethos, grammar, politeness
  - Discursive Practice - interdiscursivity, intertextual chains, and manifest intertextuality
  - Social Practice – specify nature of discourse practice which is the basis for explaining why discourse practice is the way it is

Fairclough, (1992), p. 73
Data and Collection

- 8 distinct undergraduate courses
- Copy and paste threads
- Store by course, semester, year
- Download a copy of the course syllabus
Limitations and Assumptions

- Analyzing existing data from discussion board posts
- Evaluating undergraduate courses only
- By the number and extent of courses available to the researcher for analysis
- Data are truthful, meaning that the participants in the class who are posting on the discussion boards are posting statements which are accurately reflective of their thoughts
### Summary of Major Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Length (weeks)</th>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Expectations by Faculty for Posts</th>
<th>Point or Percentage (%) of Grade</th>
<th>Faculty Role</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Summer 2016</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Consistent Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Spring 2016</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1 Original post; 1 reply minimum</td>
<td>150 points</td>
<td>Consistent Participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Summer 2015</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1st week original post. 2nd week one reply</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Sporadic participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Summer 2015</td>
<td>6,1</td>
<td>1st week original post. 2nd week one reply</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>Sporadic participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Spring 2016</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Original post by Wednesday. Replies to two others by Sunday</td>
<td>140 points</td>
<td>Never participated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Spring 2016</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Original post by Wednesday. Replies to two others by Sunday</td>
<td>140 points</td>
<td>Never participated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>Spring 2016</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>130 points</td>
<td>Consistent Participation</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Summer 2015</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Not stated</td>
<td>25 points</td>
<td>Consistent Participation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Major Findings

• Pattern of topic introduction
  – Faculty very powerful

• Acceptance or rejection of topics

• Overwhelming positive politeness

• “Conditioned” over time to use netiquette, but does this prohibit rejection

• Development of ethos
  – Affirmation of understanding
  – Building beliefs/positive politeness
Research Questions Answered

• What is the nature of the patterns of communication inside the discussion boards?
  – Patterns from analysis tied into teaching presence

• Does the structure of the language that is used by students in online discussion boards create and/or maintain power relationships? If so, how and to what extent?
  – Power of faculty member in topic control tied into cognitive presence

• Are the verbal interactions that are present in online discussion boards reflective of various social and historical factors? If so, how and to what extent?
  – Face-to-Face student implications along with ethos and positive politeness/netiquette tied into social presence
Conclusions

- **Teaching Presence**
  - Presence of the faculty member
  - Facilitation role by faculty member and students

- **Social Presence**
  - Biographies
  - Introductions
  - No use of emoticons or special characters

- **Cognitive Presence**
  - Most lacking element

- **Controversial topics**
  - Why not more debate
  - Power of Faculty member on topics selected along with divergent viewpoints on these controversial topics

- **Constant Communication**
  - Weekly, bi-weekly is constant
  - Never revisit material, or come full circle with the discussions in the course
Implications and Recommendations

• More studies to answer more of the questions we opened up

• How this applies to faculty, administrators, and instructional design staff
  – Purpose of discussion boards
  – Divergent viewpoints through materials presented
  – Challenge and develop critical thinking skills vs just establishing social presence

• Future studies
  – larger sample size; larger course sizes; different geographic locations; different student demographics; similar student demographics; similar geographic location; public vs private vs for-profit institutions;
  – Review of netiquette rules to include rejection of topics and ideas
References


Thank you!

Questions and Answers