

Participation in class and in online discussions: Gender differences

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Abstract

Gender differences between participation in face-to-face and web-based classroom discussions were examined, by comparing the men–women actual participation ratio to the men–women attendance (or login) ratio. It was found that men over-proportionally spoke at the face-to-face classroom whereas women over-proportionally posted messages in the web-based conference. Two alternative explanations are discussed. It is suggested that either women prefer written communication more than men do, or that women prefer written communication over spoken communication. Nonetheless, despite some advantages of virtual discussions, especially for women, the online environment is apparently not attractive enough for either gender.

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1. Introduction

Despite the importance often assigned to participation in classroom discussions, it has been repeatedly found that most students do not participate (e.g., Caspi, Chajut, Saporta, & Beyth-Marom, 2006; Crombie, Pyke, Silverthorn, Jones, & Piccinin, 2003; Gorsky, Caspi, & Trumper, 2004). For example, Crombie and her colleagues (2003) reported that 64% of the students never, rarely, or only occasionally asked or responded to a question in the classroom. Caspi and his colleagues (2006) recently reported that about 55% of the students never or rarely participated in class. Women avoid participation in classroom discussions more than men. The present study aims to explore this gender difference. The main question of this study is whether differences between two learning environments – the traditional university classroom and the web-based instructional environment (WBIE) – affect the rate of participation by gender.

A large body of research is devoted to gender differences in classroom behavior (e.g., Canada & Pringle, 1995; Cornelius, Gray, & Constantinople, 1990; Crombie et al., 2003; Fassinger, 1995; Sadker & Sadker,

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1994; Younger, Warrington, & Williams, 1999). The main finding is that women tend to speak less frequently and confidently than their male classmates. Instructors interact with male students more frequently, ask them better questions, and give them more precise and helpful feedback (Sadker & Sadker, 1994). Although female students initiate more interactions than do male students, male students receive more follow-up (Canada & Pringle, 1995). In general, men dominate the classroom discussion.

One leading explanation for the domination of men in classroom discussions is the “chilly climate” (Hall & Sandler, 1982, 1984). This term relates to a cluster of kinds of systematic discrimination that disadvantage women in an academic environment. Crombie and her colleagues (2003) gave the following examples that manifest such behavior: sexist use of language; presentation of stereotypic views of women; and instructors favoring male students. They noted that the existence of this construct was documented in many studies, though some did not find it.

In comparison to participation in the face-to-face classroom, participation in the web-based instructional environment (WBIE) tends to be even lower (see Caspi et al., 2006). Regarding the influence of gender on participation, some studies found equal participation of women and men in WBIE (e.g., Davidson-Shivers, Morris, & Sriwongkol, 2003; Graddol & Swann, 1989; Masters & Oberprieler, 2004; McConnell, 1997; McLean & Morrison, 2000; Ory, Bullock, & Burnaska, 1997; Poole, 2000). However, other studies found gender differences either in the number of participants, type of participation, or dynamics of participation. It is noted that women have been found to enroll in online courses at a higher rate than men (Thompson, 1998). Arbaugh (2000) reported that women begin with a high level of participation that decreases over time and increases toward the end of the course, while men’s participation is stable but on a moderate level. Barrett and Lally (1999) found that the mean length of messages sent to an online seminar by male students was, on average, more than twice as long as messages sent by female students. Sierpe (2001) found that a very small male minority dominated the conversational floor. In addition, regarding the type of participation, Sierpe reported that men were more likely to contribute to topical discussions and more likely to send multiple contributions to individual discussions. Jaffe and his colleagues (1999) found that women, more than men, exhibited communication patterns of social interdependence (such as references to others, self-reference, supporting references, and emotional discourse) in academic asynchronous discussions. Yates (2001) concluded that gender differences found in face-to-face classrooms can also be found in WBIE with men engaging in similar tactics of exclusion and delegitimation. Like all communications media, web-based communication suffers from the intrusion of existing social relations, including those that are based upon inequalities of access and power.

Nevertheless, Gunn and her colleagues (2003) found that women logged in, posted and read more messages than their male counterparts on the course bulletin board. Wolfe (2000) found that the same females who were thoroughly marginalized in in-class, face-to-face discussions achieved complete parity with males in computer-mediated discussion groups. This study also found that women were more likely than men to express a preference for the online format. Bostock and Lizhi (2005) reported that all-women groups posted more messages than all-men groups. In mixed-gender groups women posted more messages than men, but fewer than in all-women groups. Men in mixed-gender groups posted more messages than in all-men groups. Bostack and Lihzi concluded that the presence of men deterred women’s writing. However, Pollock, Hamann, and Wilson (2005) found that in balanced-gender groups, students of both sexes wrote longer messages, and posted more statements that signaled interaction with other participants. In addition, voices of female students were expressed more strongly in online than in face-to-face courses, and this contributed in turn to greater perceived deep learning (Anderson & Haddad, 2005). It was also found that when anonymity was allowed, women contributed strong assertive remarks, even though they did not engage in heated debates in face-to-face classrooms (Bellman, Tindimubona, & Arias, 1993).

Thus, it is possible that the “chilly climate” did not migrate from the traditional face-to-face environment to the web-based environment. Other factors may be responsible for differences in participation of men and women in WBIE. First, men may perceive the purpose of learning via WBIE as an easy and economical way to learn, while women may view it as a way to increase collaborative learning (Arbaugh, 2000). In the same vein, Giannini-Gachago and Seleka (2005) reported that men asked questions and made statements more than women, while women responded more than men. If students hold different perceptions regarding the purpose of the environment, they may participate in different ways. Second, since it was claimed that women prefer web-mediated learning (Belanger, 1999, but see Anderson, 1997 for an opposite view), it is reasonable to

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