

What do Graduate Learners Say About Instructor and Learner Discourse in Online Courses? Part Two

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Abstract

This study was grounded on the assumption that there is a correlation between the extent of both *instructor* and *learner discourse* (ILD) in Threaded Discussions (TDs) in online courses. It was also grounded on the assumption that ILD is a factor of importance to both learners and the vitality of the online institution. This study empirically examined the extent of ILD in TDs in online courses. 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 instructor and 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. This relationship was of practical and statistical significance. ILD is clearly a factor of great importance to learners whom recognized the multiple roles and competences of online instructors in creating effective learning communities. Stakeholders of the online institution should support the facilitation of ILD and should hire instructors with expertise in online communication and mentoring skills whom can provide timely and quality feedback that is enthusiastic, encouraging, directional, helpful, motivational, and supportive. These findings contribute to a better understanding of ILD leading to learner success, satisfaction, and retention.

Introduction

Online institutions may facilitate learning through forums. An online course may contain a forum for every lesson or module depending on the policy on forums set forth by online institutions.

Online instructors and learners may post and respond to e-text-based messages. Several e-responses, posted by both instructors and learners, create a Threaded Discussion (TD).

TDs are considered a communication tool for interactivity purposes in online courses. TDs may be archived from anyplace and at anytime by instructors, learners, and other stakeholders of an online institution through a logging in process requiring an ID and password assigned by the online institution.

TDs may form the foundation for Instructor and Learners Discourse (ILD) in online courses. Discourse (i.e., e-dialogue, e-discussion) between instructors and learners may facilitate learning, teaching, and training. ILD may create a sense of virtual community and opportunities for answering questions, injecting knowledge, and sharing of expertise, ideas, and opinions.

This study is grounded on the following assumptions:

- There is a correlation between instructor and learners discourse.
- ILD is a factor of great importance to learners taking online courses.
- The roles of online instructors are multiple (e.g., intellectual, social, pedagogical, and technical).
- The competences of online instructors are multiple (e.g., skillful in assessment and evaluation, teaching methodologies and qualities, online communication technologies, facilitation of virtual learning communities, facilitation of learning, and so forth).

Purpose

Contributing to the knowledge base about ILD in online courses was the purpose of this study. Specifically, this study was conducted to answer the following research questions:

- What do graduate learners in education say about ILD?
- Which teaching qualities of online instructors are important to graduate learners in education during ILD?
- Is there a direct relationship between the extent of instructor discourse and the extent of learner discourse in TDs in online courses?

Based on input from graduate learners in education, answers to these research questions may assist stakeholders of the online institution in creating effective ILD. Specifically, the findings of this study may have implications for policy and practice (e.g., course design, curricula, course delivery methods through online communication technologies, student enrollment and retention, and so forth) by utilizing pragmatic discourse strategies.

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 institution is gaining considerable popularity among those seeking a higher education (Arbaugh, 2000; Deal, 2002; Kearsley, 2002; King & Hildreth, 2001; Mayzer & Dejong, 2003; Picciano, 2001; Schott Karr, 2002; Taylor, 2002). Within this competitive marketplace of higher

education, input from graduate learners in education regarding Instructor and Learners Discourse (ILD) is clearly a factor of great importance for the vitality of the online institution.

Current research has emphasized that teaching online calls for instructors to take on an intellectual and social role fostering a sense of community among groups of learners in online courses (Kiriakidis as cited in Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Arbaugh, 2000; Overbaugh, 2002). A high degree of interactivity between instructors and learners is the most important role of the instructor in online classes (Brown & Kiriakidis, 2007; Kearsley, 2000). Online learners are usually self-motivated and independent learners skillful with computers and should be given opportunities to interact with instructors and other learners in order to create a community of learning utilizing ILD. Learners' input on ILD may assist stakeholders in: a) hiring competent online instructors, b) setting clear expectations on ILD, c) course design initiatives; and d) student enrollment and retention.

Review of the Literature

Online communication technologies have great potential educational benefits. According to Conole (2004), "We are still at the beginning of harnessing their potential" (p. 2). According to Observatory on Borderless Higher Education (2004), "While we may not realize it, we have entered the perfect electric storm, where technology, the art of teaching, and the needs of learners are converging" (p. 2).

Taylor (2006) warned that it is imperative that administrators meet the ever-increasing demand for technologically advanced learning opportunities. 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). The Sloan Consortium (2005) asserted that leaders in higher education expect "their online course enrollments to increase" (p. 5). Kopf (2007) asserted that the online learning environment will grow into a \$52.6 billion industry by 2010.

Research has shown that faculty satisfaction ratings and retention are directly related to learner satisfaction ratings and retention (Baker, Redfield, & Tonkin, 2006; Kelly, 2006). The extensive studies on online learner satisfaction and retention issues conducted by Noel-Levitz (2006) reported three top concerns online learners have involving the faculty member's: (a) competency of instruction, (b) communications, and (c) availability. Yang and Cornelius (2005) and Paloff and Pratt (2007) have indicated that learner success in the online classroom may depend most on the competency of professors, especially those capable of creating a sense of community and emotional connection with learners.

Leaders of online universities should be concerned with vital aspects of hiring quality instructors and assisting in ILD as they strategize to develop and sustain the delivery of quality online courses and programs (Kelly, 2006; Orlando & Poitrus, 2005). Leaders of online universities whom want to have a future in the market that is both meaningful and effective to postmodern learners need to assure their constituencies that their

organizations will provide the highest quality courses facilitated by qualified faculty members able to succeed in ILD in order to help learners achieve the academic goals.

According to Schuster and Finkelstein (2006), perhaps the most valuable assets of any institution of higher learning are the faculty members. Sammons and Ruth (2007) asserted that it will become vital for institutions to recruit and retain the most qualified faculty members, because the actual advancement and success of online education as a whole rests largely upon the motivations of online faculty who choose to assume this responsibility.

Scholars recommend that online instructors create a virtual community of learning in order to foster an online learning environment necessary for learners to thrive as e-learners (Havice & Chang, 2002; Picciano, 2002). Online communities allow for social and collegial interaction between instructors and learners (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2002). According to Allen and Seaman (2006), online learners receive a quality education that is either equal or superior to face-to-face instruction. According to Overbaugh (2002), telecommunications learners seem to benefit from a heightened sense of academic community resulting from being able to connect with peers.

Modern learners may take online courses and continue to meet their personal, family, and professional obligations, and to achieve their academic goals. Modern online learners such as Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Echo Boomers may be seeking higher education through online courses where e-communication and connectivity are essential. Autonomous, self-directed, and goal- and relevancy-oriented learners may be looking to find online instruction offering sufficient instructor and learner contact. The online learning experience has proven itself to learners who show up at their computers and are determined to complete their online course (Groth, 2007). According to White (2005), 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 withdrawing from courses.

Facilitating ILD may offer rich and diverse information and knowledge and give learners a sense of belonging and connectedness to their online courses. Facilitating ILD may provide opportunities for online learners to communicate and refine knowledge. ILD has been conceptualized as an important success factor in online courses. Discourse may minimize feelings of isolation and foster a sense of connection among learners (e.g., Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2001). In order to overcome feelings of isolation, it is important to establish a sense of community between instructors and learners. Community is what gives learners a sense of belonging and connectedness to schools (Havice & Chang, 2002).

The most valuable assets of any institution of higher learning are the faculty members (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). Leaders who can recruit and retain the most qualified and motivated instructors may be able more confidently to lead their institutions to success with their online offerings. Motivation may be based on the learner's actions such as how quickly assignments are completed and the number of messages between instructors and

learners (Chyung, 2007).

Given the aforementioned expectations, the trend of hiring competent online instructors able to effectively utilize ILD will continue. ILD in online courses is an important element fostering learner satisfaction and a sense of online community (Kiriakidis, 2007; Brown & Kiriakidis, 2007; Kiriakidis, Gueorguiev, 2007).

Instructor and Learners Discourse

The roles of online instructors are multiple (i.e., intellectual, social, pedagogical, and technical). The *intellectual* role of online instructors is to encourage deeper analysis of the course content in order for learners to produce high quality academic work. The *social* role of online instructors is to foster a sense of community among groups of learners through timely and quality ILD where instructors engage learners to participate in TDs in order to develop a cohesive online learning community. The *pedagogical* role of online instructors is to facilitate ILD leading to a more in-depth dialogue in the online classes, and assisting learners in mastering the curriculum. The *technical* role of online instructors is to be skillful in online communication technologies (e.g., ANGEL, WebCT, Blackboard, eCollege) in order to facilitate learning. The aforementioned subset of the multiple roles of online instructors requires time commitment and a great deal of written communication.

The success of online courses may depend upon the extent of ILD supporting the social and academic needs of online learners and improving their critical thinking skills. ILD may provide opportunities for deep learning experiences when instructors and learners create a collegial environment with frequent ILD interactions.

Conceptual Framework

This study builds upon and extends the facilitation research of others (e.g., Chou, 2001; Deal, 2002, Worley & Chesebro, 2002; Overbaugh, 2002). This study is grounded on the assumptions that: a) There is a correlation between instructor and learners discourse, b) ILD is a factor of great importance to learners taking online courses, c) The roles of online instructors are multiple, and d) The competences of online instructors are multiple. Building on these assumptions, in conjunction with the existing research literature, this study recognizes the importance of ILD in online courses to the vitality of the online learning institution.

Research Methodology

This study's path analysis model is 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 courses in education offered entirely online by an accredited institution of higher education. Course evaluation surveys were used to collect qualitative data of learners' opinions about instructor and learn 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 discourse component of their respective online course. With the inherent capacity to archive asynchronous discourse, computer-mediated transcripts provided an ideal means to identify and analyze the extent of asynchronous 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 educational institution 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 online educational institution. Course evaluation survey questions include: a) rating both the online course and the online instructor, b) should learners recommend the online course to another person, and c) 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: a) the quantitatively measured hypothesized relationship (if there is a correlation between instructor and learners discourse), b) ILD as a factor of importance to learners, c) the multiple roles of online instructors, and d) the multiple competences of online instructors.

Participants and Setting

The setting consisted of an online institution of higher education offering graduate level degree programs in education entirely online. The participating institution is: (a) accredited by the appropriate accrediting body; (b) there are no residency requirements; (c) all communications and interactions between learners and instructors take place online using email and threaded discussions using the institutions' computer server; (d)

instructors are required to participate in asynchronous discussion forums; and (e) learners are required to participate in asynchronous discussion forums. Asynchronous discussions are text-based, mandatory, and contribute between 5% and 25% of each learner's final grade. A learner meets the course requirements on TDs by posting between one and three responses to each question posted by the instructor in each lesson or module of online courses.

Data Collection

The researcher collected the aforementioned data from the online databases of the participating online institution of higher education. Specifically, the online databases contained copies of the threaded discussions. The researcher selected randomly 75% of the threaded discussions. The collected data were saved into a text file which was edited to ensure learner and instructor anonymity. The edited data were saved into one database file in order to perform content analysis.

Data Analysis

In this study's quantitative path analysis model, both learner and instructor discourse were continuous variables. Descriptive statistics were performed in order to compute the learner n size and the extent of learner discourse (number of learner postings), and the instructor n size and the extent of instructor discourse (number of instructor postings). Descriptive statistics were also performed to compute the mean and standard deviation of the number of learner postings and the number of instructor postings.

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 $\alpha = .05$ 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, there were 14 instructors and 249 learners. The content analysis revealed 169 instructor e-postings and 1,014 learner e-postings. With these numbers, this study's sample size was $n = 263$ participants and the total number of e-postings posted by both instructors and learners was 1,183.

Table 1 presents the descriptive data for instructor and learner discourse. It includes 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.

Table 1

Descriptive Data for Instructor and Learner Discourse

	n Size	Number of Postings	M(SD)
Learners	249	1,014	72.43 (32.517)
Instructors	14	169	12.07 (9.042)
Total	263	1,183	16.04788 (5.00)

The relationship between the number of instructor e-postings and the number of 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 $r = .763(**)$ where $* = p < .05$; $** = p < .01$ level (2-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 .582 with $F = 16.695$ significant at $p = .002$. Thus, the data analysis indicated that this direct relationship was both of statistical and practical significance.

The relationship between the extent of instructor discourse and the extent of learner discourse in online courses was found to be of statistical significance ($r = .763, p < .01$). 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 ($\beta = .763, p < .01$).

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' opinion about instructor and learners discourse. This open-ended course evaluation survey question was used to provide further insight toward the nature of: a) the quantitatively measured hypothesized relationship (if there is a correlation between instructor and learners discourse), b) ILD as a factor of importance to learners, c) the multiple roles of online instructors, and d) the multiple competences of online instructors.

Survey responses to this question were transcribed and saved into a database for analysis. Approximately 249 statements were collected and main themes were derived from this analysis as presented below. Exact quotes are presented within double quotation marks as excerpts.

Table 2

What do graduate learners in education say about ILD? Which teaching qualities of online instructors are important to graduate learners in education during ILD?

Teaching Qualities	Percentage
Interaction (ILD)	97%

Mentoring Skills	97%
Timely & Quality Feedback	95%
Instructors were Enthusiastic	90%
Instructors Provided Encouragement	88%
Instructors Provided Guidance	85%
Instructors Provided Assistance	85%
Instructors Provided Motivation	82%
Instructors Provided Support	82%

Learners reported that *interaction* between instructors and learners helped them master the curriculum and "apply learning to [their] current job(s)." ILD "items in this course have been pretty priceless each week.... I am glad to be in the interactive online version of this class! ... I appreciate interaction between instructors and learners ... I appreciate his exceptional promptness in interacting with all of us ... Appreciate the effective learning community and environment he has created through the discussion threads ... I enjoyed the course tremendously and look forward to completing the remaining courses with instructors in the same spirit ... Thank you so much for presenting such a wonderful and interesting series of lectures and course material and helping us to explore this vast subject in a much interesting way ... The opportunity to communicate has really been a source of inspiration. I look forward to talking another course with the same professor if at all possible. Learners reported that, overall, they enjoyed ILD in their online classes very much. As a result, learners learned a lot and enjoyed the course. "I enjoyed this class...I really enjoyed the material and learned a lot from it...discourse has been very helpful...I really enjoyed this class...I am thinking of continuing with online classes because of my enjoyment in this course.... This course has been such a pleasurable experience... I have gained a wealth of knowledge from the course...I thoroughly enjoyed learning ... Thank you for making this course such a positive and enjoyable experience ... Thank you Professor for your kind words. I could have not being successful without your cooperation and kindness. I enjoyed the course very much and have only good words to say about you. I will recommend this course to others. My recommendation for you stands."

Learners referred to the online instructors as *mentors* in their learning. Mentoring helped learners "learn a lot from the course" and expressed their wish to have the same instructor(s) in other online courses ... "I hope I'll have the same professor again in other classes...I look forward to again having the same professor in the future... It was my pleasure to have Dr..... as my professor." Learners were impressed with the mentoring skills of the online instructors. "I was very impressed with his mentoring skills, valuable comments, quick responses, and obvious willingness to help students...I felt very comfortable asking questions. He is an excellent mentor.....Her mentoring over the web was comforting and helpful... His mentoring is appreciated....His mentoring techniques were energizing.

Learners reported that the instructors provided quality and timely *feedback* during ILD. Instructors responded to questions within 24 hours and "made the course such as great learning experience ... Thanks to his valuable feedback ... Her feedback definitely

improved my level of knowledge and understanding ... I like the approach this professor has. He gave us detailed feedback which was very helpful ... I really want to say thank you for the professor's great feedback ... Thanks for his thorough feedback which was very helpful ... I really want to say thanks for the great feedback ... I struggled with the course work. Although the course content was challenging, the professor's feedback helped me ... He has always given me feedback promptly and thoroughly ... I found your feedback very intriguing ... I must say feedback is so refreshing and having him as a professor that I can communicate with and address any concern or even just to say hi made a big difference in my learning. I will continue to do my best in the next online course ... I appreciate her feedback and have certainly enjoyed the learning experience with this class. Thanks for everything."

Learners reported that the instructors were very *enthusiastic*. "Thanks for the enthusiastic postings ... I meant to take this course as "credit by exam" but his postings and emails made me decide to go through the whole course ... I started this class a little nervous because I'd never taken online courses. It turns out that I like it better than traditional college. It's hard to imagine at first, so once you get the flow of it, it's quite nice ... Thank you very much for your very prompt and encouraging postings to the discussion board. Indeed they have helped to overcome most if not all of my fears, expressed to you earlier. I enjoyed the course - balancing work and study - to upkeep the enthusiasm and timeliness of responses. Thanking you again for your prompt, detailed, encouraging, and enthusiastic postings ... Thank you for your feedback. I am enjoying the class mainly because of the way you are conducting it. I was a bit intimidated about this class - it's been a long time since I finished my undergraduate degree. Thanks again for the enthusiasm, encouragement, and positive feedback. I feel very comfortable coming to you with questions."

Learners reported that their instructors provided a plethora of continuous *encouragement* in the ILD. Instructors posted "encouraging words" throughout the course that "definitely" helped learners improve their "level of knowledge and understanding." Many learners have been "out of school for more than 10 years" and the instructor's postings were "very encouraging!!!" and "inspiring" to learners. "Thank you for your feedback and words of encouragement in response to my submissions. Please continue to provide your valuable feedback ... I really enjoyed it and I have learnt so many new things which are and will be very helpful to do my job. I appreciate the professor's encouragement."

Learners reported that their instructors offered *guidance* during the online course. "He offered guidance and direction on a daily basis ... I succeeded because of his feedback and guidance ... Thanks to her guidance throughout the course ... He was not only my professor but also my guidance adviser ... I have truly enjoyed my very first course at your university under your able guidance. I am thankful to you for providing us this learning opportunity. I do feel I have learned new concepts and am hopeful of applying the same practically in the near future ... Just a little note to say about my professor: Because you ask, they think, Because you explain, they understand; Because you listen, they feel understood; And because you care, they care. Because you've chosen to Teach, they learn."

Learners reported that they received *assistance* in ILD from their instructors in understanding the curricula and in "completing the assignments" that learners "enjoyed the class and learned so much more than [they] thought [they] would."

Learners reported that their instructors *motivated* learners to participate in the ILD. "I felt very motivated by his comments ... Thank you for your kind comments. You have been a source of inspiration and motivation for this course and I look forward to taking other courses with you.

Learners reported that their instructors were very *supportive* in the ILD. Instructors supported learners with positive comments on their postings. Instructors posted "kind words" while providing "continuous support" to learners to master the curricula. "Thank you for all of your support in answering my questions ... He is a people person. He makes us the students feel as if we are all important. That is a strength that cannot be measured. He made me feel as if he really cares about my success in this class. I didn't feel like I was just another social security number in this class. You need more professors like him."

The aforementioned qualitative data excerpts indicate that ILD is important to graduate learners in education. Teaching qualities of online instructors important to graduate learners in education during ILD are: Interaction, Mentoring Skills, Timely and Quality Feedback, Enthusiasm, Encouragement, Guidance, Assistance, Motivation, and Support.

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 timely and 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 in education during ILD in online classes. ILD is clearly a factor of great importance to learners whom recognized the multiple roles and competences of online instructors. This study found that 97% of the participants reported that interactions between instructors and learners create effective learning communities.

Mentoring is clearly a factor of great importance to learners. This study found that 97% of the participants reported that their instructors were mentors whose mentoring skills assisted learners in learning.

Quality and timely feedback during ILD is clearly another factor of great importance to learners. This study found that 95% of the participants reported that instructors responded to questions within 24 hours and provided valuable and thorough feedback which helped learners in improving their levels of knowledge and understanding.

Enthusiasm of online instructors is clearly a factor of great importance to learners. This study found that 90% of the participants reported that their instructors were very enthusiastic posting enthusiastic postings that assisted learners in reducing possible fears of taking online courses and in interacting with the instructors.

Instructors providing encouragement is clearly a factor of great importance to learners. This study found that 88% of the participants reported that their instructors provided a plethora of continuous encouragement in the ILD. Encouraging postings helped learners improve their level of knowledge and understanding.

Instructors providing guidance is clearly a factor of great importance to learners. This study found that 85% of the participants reported that their instructors provided continuous guidance throughout the course.

Instructors providing assistance is clearly a factor of great importance to learners. This study found that 85% of the participants reported that their instructors provided assistance in ILD which helped learners in understanding the curricula.

Instructors providing motivation is clearly a factor of great importance to learners. This study found that 82% of the participants reported that their instructors motivated them to participate in the ILD.

Instructors providing support is clearly a factor of great importance to learners. This study found that 82% of the participants reported that their instructors were continuously supportive in the ILD.

Policy makers, administrators, and faculty may wish to use the findings of this study to develop a policy on ILD in TDs in order to improve course design, curriculum, and delivery methods by utilizing pragmatic discourse strategies and operational activities. Online administrators need to hire competent instructors whom can effectively facilitate ILD by utilizing his or her communication and mentoring skills and by providing timely and quality feedback that is enthusiastic, encouraging, directional, helpful, motivational, and supportive.

Online course administrators may achieve greater enrollment and retention rates in online courses by encouraging and supporting ILD in TDs. Online administrators may define the extent of ILD in TDs in a policy on ILD and include such as policy in the faculty handbook. ILD allows online learners to experience academic success in a technologically-based setting.

Online course administrators should work with online course developers, instructors, and technical support experts in order for online instructors to utilize communications technology tools that support frequent ILD. A policy on the extent of ILD may assist instructors and learners in creating a more meaningful learning and teaching environment. With ILD support and a policy on clear expectations in ILD in TDs,

learners may be assisted in becoming more engaged in TDs and more satisfied with learning in the online learning environment.

Questions still remain unanswered concerning whether or not the findings of this study would vary as a function of a policy on the extent of ILD in TDs of the online higher education institution with regard to: (a) academic level of online courses; (b) the multiple roles of the instructor teaching undergraduate and/or graduate online courses; and (c) the academic fields (e.g., business, education, information technology). Scholars may wish to examine the effect of the extent of instructor discourse on the extent of learner discourse should discourse be synchronous and multimedia-based.

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 findings of this study suggest that there is a direct relationship between instructor and learner discourse in online courses. This relationship was of practical and statistical significance. ILD is clearly a factor of great importance to learners whom recognized the multiple roles and competences of online instructors in creating effective learning communities.

Stakeholders of the online institution should support the facilitation of ILD and should hire instructors with expertise in online communication and mentoring skills whom can provide timely and quality feedback that is enthusiastic, encouraging, directional, helpful, motivational, and supportive. These findings contribute to a better understanding of ILD leading to learner success, satisfaction, and retention.

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