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The Effects of an Online Seminars Policy on Communication between Faculty and Students in the Online Learning Environment

Peter KIRIAKIDIS[1]

Abstract

A graduate online university in northern United States of America implemented a policy on online seminars for each online course to help students increase their proficiency levels in course content via mandatory communication with faculty and peers. No research had been conducted at the research site to examine the effects of the online seminars policy on communication between faculty and students. The research problem at the study site was the lack of empirical evidence that the online seminars policy on communication between faculty and students was effective as measured by the frequency of postings posted by faculty members and their students during the online seminars. This study was grounded in the social learning theory of Vygotsky. The research question that guided this study was "What are the effects of the online seminars policy on communication between faculty and students as measured by the frequency of their postings." Archived data were collected for two cohorts of 175 graduate students and 12 faculty members from before and after the implementation of the online seminars policy. Content analysis procedures were used on the computer-mediated transcripts of the discussions between faculty and students within several graduate courses in education offered entirely online. An independent sample t test was utilized to analyze the data and the researcher found a significant difference between the means of the two cohorts of faculty and student postings. The empirical evidence was that the online seminars policy on communication between faculty and students was effective.

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Keywords:
online universities, online seminars, communication, policy, online learning environment, professional development programs

Research Study
Introduction

Mandatory synchronous online seminars and text-based discourse: (a) might be an important factor for learner retention in the online learning environment; (b) might be critical for motivation and engagement of online learners in active learning by keeping the learners engaged throughout their program of study; (c) support both the academic and social needs of the students; (d) might assist university administrators and faculty in creating a virtual community for students to engage in a stronger buy-in with the institution's program; (e) might provide opportunities for deep learning experiences when faculty members and students create a collegial environment with frequent text-based postings for interactions; and (f) might be a factor affecting the success of online courses and ultimately the vitality of the online institution. Policy makers, online instructors, administrators, and students may wish to take into consideration the facilitation of online seminars to ensure student communication and ultimately student satisfaction.

The Research Problem

Online universities are gaining considerable popularity among those seeking a higher education with respect to the potential student's time, location, extraneous obligations, and financial and educational goals. Mandatory online seminars are clearly a factor of great importance to online institutions and their students.

University administrators at the research study experienced challenges with student retention in online courses. Students had reported via course evaluations that more communication between faculty members and peers was necessary due to the lack of face-to-face interactions. A graduate online university in northern United States of America implemented a policy on online seminars for each online course to help students increase their proficiency levels in course content via

mandatory communication with faculty and peers. No research had been conducted at the research site to examine the effects of the online seminars policy on communication between faculty and students. Specifically, the research problem at the study site was the lack of empirical evidence that the online seminars policy on communication between faculty and students was effective as measured by the frequency of postings posted by faculty members and their students during the online seminars. At the research site, online faculty members have a terminal degree in their chosen field and are utilized for specific graduate online classes within the K-12 classroom, and have extensive face-to-face and online teaching experience. Also, at the research site, students are K-12 educators working on the master's degree entirely online.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this quantitative study was to compare the means of the archived faculty and student postings before and after the implementation of the online seminars policy on communication between faculty and students to shed further light on the importance of creating and implementing a policy supporting communication in the online learning environment via mandatory online seminars. The findings of this study might help university faculty, administrators, and policy makers to design, implement, and evaluate online seminars policy on communication between faculty and students.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded on the assumption that the facilitation of online seminars is important in the vitality of the online learning institution at the research study. Building on this assumption, in conjunction with the existing literature review, the researcher recognized the importance of a policy on communication between faculty and students during online seminars. Specifically, the researcher empirically examined the extent of communication (i.e., discourse) during online seminars. This study was grounded in the social learning theory (Vygotsky, 1978) because when faculty and students are engaged in synchronous communication via online seminars by posting questions and responses within a supportive learning environment students receive

appropriate guidance and as a result professional learning occurs (Kearsley, 1994). Actively engaged faculty and students in online seminars using support-based learning might enhance students' proficiency in the online course. The successful implementation of the online seminars might have had an effect on faculty and students' communication where the faculty members provided synchronous responses to students. The online seminars were designed to support the premise that each online faculty member could contribute to student achievement via synchronous communication. Student engagement during online seminars might increase student achievement in terms of feeling more positive with and confident of their communication and course skills.

Nature of the Study

The setting consisted of an online institution of higher education offering graduate level degree programs in teacher education. The participating institution is: (a) accredited by the Higher Learning Commission (HLC); (b) there are no residency requirements; (c) all communications and interactions between faculty and students take place online using email, asynchronous threaded discussions, and synchronous seminar discussions using the institutions' computer servers; (d) faculty members are required to participate in asynchronous discussion forums at a minimum of 3 days per week and are specific to a given topic related to the readings and student assignments; (e) students are required to participate at a minimum of 3 times per week in the asynchronous discussions; (f) faculty members are required to facilitate asynchronous discussion forum typically each week of the 10-week term; (g) students are required to attend the synchronous seminar these conversations do not count towards the learner's final grade.

Literature Review

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). Additionally, Noel-Levitz

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(2006) found that learners' most important concern was to have communication and direction from their professors in which they can receive these directives within a seminar. 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. Moreover, the most valuable assets of any institution of higher learning are the faculty members (Schuster & Finkelstein, 2006). 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). Motivation may be based on the learner's behavior such as how quickly assignments are completed and the number of messages between educator and learner (Chyung, 2007).

Facilitating discussions through online seminars may offer rich and diverse information and knowledge and give learners a sense of belonging and connectedness to their online courses. Discussions have been conceptualized as an important success factor minimizing feelings of isolation and fostering a sense of connection among learners (Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2001). In order to overcome feelings of isolation, a sense of community between instructors and learners needs to be established because community is what gives learners a sense of belonging and connectedness to schools (Havice & Chang, 2002).

Scholars have found evidence that high quality staff development programs affect student achievement (Christie, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2009; Guskey, 2002; Leonard & Leonard, 2005). According to Mizell (2007), "Professional development has no reason to exist if it does not help educators develop the attitudes, behaviors, knowledge and skills necessary to prepare all students to perform at the proficient level" (p. 20). According to Kose (2009), high quality teaching can support a school culture that encourages continuous learning through the proliferation of learning communities and shared leadership roles and responsibilities. According to Fullan (2006), the more teachers collaborate, the more leadership is shared.

Staff development programs should be job-embedded and related to instruction in the classroom (Greene, 2003; Kelleher, 2003). Staff development programs should be an essential part of the culture of

the school (Scribner, 1999). Staff development programs should support the school cultures' view of education as collaborative (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2005) and encourage the teachers to see themselves as learners working continuously to improve their teaching practices (Kent, 2004). Teachers need ongoing opportunities to learn together, apply learning to the classroom, and reflect on what works and why (Chappuis, Chappuis, & Stiggins, 2009). Professional development programs with the largest effect on student learning offer 30 to 100 hours spread out over 6 to 12 months (Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009). Professional learning should be aligned to assessments (American Educational Research Association, 2005). According to Guskey and Suk Yoon (2009), effective professional development requires considerable time, and that time must be well organized, carefully structured, purposefully directed, and focused on content or pedagogy or both. According to Desimone (2009), "Measuring the effects of professional development is analogous to measuring the quality of the teachers' learning experiences, the nature of teacher change, and the extent to which such change affects student learning" (p. 188).

Teacher leadership influences teachers in the school to adapt their own practices and attitudes with students and each other to be more effective (Donaldson, 2006). Teacher leadership promotes instructional improvement (Silva, Gimbert, & Nolan, 2000). High quality intervention programs are sustained, intensive, focused on student learning, connected to the teachers' work with students, and include longer contact hours and sustained activities over time; and provide active learning opportunities, coherence with reform efforts, and a focus on subject matter (Desimone, Garet, Birman, Porter, & Suk Yoon, 2001; Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Suk Yoon, 2001; Desimone, Porter, Garet, Suk Yoon, & Birman, 2002).

Research Question and Hypotheses

The research question that guided this study was "What are the effects of the online seminars policy on communication between faculty and students as measured by the frequency of their postings."

H0: There is no significant difference in the postings mean between faculty members and students before and after the implementation of the online seminars policy on communication.

H1: There is a significant difference in the postings mean between faculty members and students before and after the implementation of the online seminars policy on communication.

Setting and Sample

University administrators at the research study experienced challenges with student retention in online courses. Students had reported via course evaluations that more communication between faculty members and peers was necessary due to the lack of face-to-face interactions.

At the research site, online faculty members have a terminal degree in their chosen field and are utilized for specific graduate online classes within the K-12 classroom, and have extensive face-to-face and online teaching experience. Also at the research site, students are K-12 educators working on the master's degree entirely online.

Online courses are offered via the e-College platform for a graduate teacher education program and promote communication between the faculty members and students with both synchronous online seminars and asynchronous threaded discussions. Synchronous opportunities consist of meeting virtually with the students' class and the instructor for weekly 1-hour seminars that consist of prescribed questions and contain information regarding current and upcoming assignments. During online seminars, discussions take the form of an online chat and are conducted in text.

At the research site, the online university has implemented a guided policy on seminar facilitation for instructors. The online seminars were designed to provide students with more communication options with online faculty members. The focus of the online seminars was on synchronous communication between faculty members and students. The research site administrators implemented the online seminars based on a needs assessment, which revealed the need for more opportunities for students to communicate with faculty members not only asynchronously but also synchronously in order to support students. After the implementation of the online seminars, the research site

administrators continued to provide teaching resources to faculty members to support their online professional learning.

The policy on online seminars entails that the instructor will arrive in the seminar 15 minutes before the seminar begins, have a present agenda of discussion topics, be flexible enough to know that teachable moments take precedence over the agenda, and allow time for students' questions and upcoming assignment review. Students may or may not attend any online seminar. If students do not attend a seminar, then there is no alternate assignment or point deduction or the need to meet with the instructor regarding "missed material." For the students' convenience, the computer-mediated transcripts of all postings during the online seminars are achieved within each course.

Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

The researcher collected archived postings posted by faculty members and students during the threaded discussions before the implementation of the online seminars. The researcher also collected archived postings posted by faculty members and students during the online seminars after the implementation of the online seminars.

The scope was delimited to the specific participants at the research site. The two cohorts of faculty members' and students' postings were selected randomly, the first cohort comprised of postings posted before the implementation of the online seminars and the second cohort comprised of postings posted after the implementation of the online seminars. The two cohorts of postings were unrelated samples posted by different students and faculty members. The scope of this study was specific to online students who participated in the asynchronous threaded discussions (before the implementation of the online seminars policy) and those who participated in the online seminars (after the implementation of the online seminars policy). The study was bounded by the online classes randomly selected at the research site.

The researcher: (a) assumed that students had an equal opportunity to benefit from the online seminars or from asynchronous threaded discussions; (b) acknowledged that the potential findings of this study might apply directly to the research site; and (c) acknowledged that accessibility to the online seminars by the students at the research site

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was applicable to the online university's academic needs. A limitation of the study was that there was no assessment measure for the online seminars (i.e., the seminars are not graded and learners do not receive any type of point or percentage toward a final grade for attendance or as a means of assessment on content within the seminar). Another limitation of this study was the time zone of the online seminars. Given the fact that this institution's online seminars are arranged at a certain day and time this potentially limits who can attend. The location of the learner and the time zone she or he is in may be a limitation.

The findings of the study might not be applicable to online faculty members and students in different contexts and might not be generalizable to the entire spectrum of online learners. Consequently, 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.

Data Collection

Each online course is 10 weeks in duration. Each online class may contain between five and 15 online students. One online instructor teaches an online course. For the purpose of this study, the researcher collected archived data from synchronous online seminars and from asynchronous threaded discussions. Six online courses were selected randomly before the implementation of the online seminars. Six online courses were selected randomly after the implementation of the online seminars.

The archived data were collected from the web server of the participating online institution of higher education. Specifically, the synchronous online database contained copies of the transcripts of the online seminars and the threaded discussions.

The researcher read and counted the frequency of students' and instructors' postings in the online seminars. The collected data were saved into a text file containing only postings posted by instructors and students per online seminar for the selected courses. No names of instructors or courses or students were saved to maintain the anonymity of the participants. The edited data were saved in order to perform content analysis.

The researcher read and counted the frequency of students' and instructors' postings in the asynchronous threaded discussions. The collected data were saved into a text file containing only postings posted by instructors and students per week for the selected courses. No names of instructors or courses or students were saved to maintain the anonymity of the participants. The edited data were saved in order to perform content analysis.

Research Methodology

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 online seminars and posted postings synchronously or posted asynchronously to the threaded discussions component of their respective online course. Archived discourse provided an ideal means to identify and analyze the extent of communication between students and instructors. Thus, the researcher used content analysis to read through the computer-mediated transcripts of discussion between instructors and students within selected graduate courses in education offered entirely online. The archived data were numeric. No names of students and instructors were collected. All data were entered into SPSS 19.0 for data analysis. The numbers of postings per class were entered into SPSS for each cohort.

Data Analysis

Both student and instructor postings were continuous variables. Descriptive statistics were performed in order to compute the student n size and the extent of student discourse (number of student postings), and the instructor n size and the extent of instructor discourse (number of instructor postings) within the synchronous discussions. Descriptive statistics were also performed to compute the mean and standard deviation of the number of student postings and the number of instructor postings. The extent of instructor discourse was the predictor variable and the extent of learner discourse was the criterion variable.

An independent sample t test was utilized to determine if there was a significant difference between the means of the two cohorts of postings. The t test was performed at a confidence level at or above the

95% (*a* = .05). No covariates and confounding variables such as students' or instructors' experience were considered because the aim of this study was to determine the difference between two cohorts of students' and instructors' postings.

The analysis revealed that the first cohort consisted of 87 students and the second cohort consisted of 88 students with 12 instructors in both cohorts (Table 1). With these two cohorts of participants, the sample size was *n* = 187. Descriptive statistics are displayed in Table 2.

Table 1

Participants in Cohorts 1 and 2

Postings	*n* Cohort 1	*n* Cohort 2
Faculty Members	6	6
Students	87	88
Total	93	94

Table 2

Mean and Standard Deviation of Cohorts 1 and 2

Control Group (Cohort 1)		Experimental Group (Cohort 2)	
Faculty *M* (*SD*)	Students *M* (*SD*)	Faculty *M* (*SD*)	Students *M* (*SD*)
32.05 (27.19)	47.04 (34.72)	62.09 (33.9)	96.18 (36.3)

The mean postings of the experimental group were higher than the mean postings of the control group. Based on the *t* test for the postings of instructors, the *t* statistic exceeded the critical values, indicating that this result was considered statistically significant, $t(12) = 3.64$, $p < 0.05$. Based on the *t* test for the postings of students, the *t* statistic exceeded the critical values, indicating that this result was considered statistically significant, $t(175) = 4.08$, $p < 0.05$. The alternative hypothesis was accepted.

The postings of the experimental group were statistically different than the postings of the control group. The data analysis revealed that there was a difference between the combined postings. Data analysis indicated that the postings of the second cohort were

statistically significant different than the postings of the first cohort. Thus, the online seminars have had a positive effect on the communication between instructors and students at the research site.

Discussion and Conclusions

The online seminars contained more postings posted by students. This study sheds further light on the importance of implementing intervention programs such as online seminars to increase the communication between instructors and students and among students. Literature review revealed that student achievement is linked to interventions (Christie, 2009; Darling-Hammond & Richardson, 2009; Desimone, 2009; Kelleher, 2003; Killion, 2008; Kose, 2009; Leonard & Leonard, 2005; Mizell, 2007; Viadero, 2007). The findings of this study provided empirical evidence that the intervention program has assisted students to increase their communication with peers and instructors. The empirical evidence created new knowledge for online university leaders of the benefits of the intervention program on student communication.

Best practices are defined by educational theorist and researchers as having practical and documented support for assisting with faculty instruction and student communication. Some of the best practices utilized by the intervention program included learner outreach, remediation services, synchronous academic assistance, integration of online technologies, frequently and timely communication regarding student progress as well as questions, and opportunities for learners to collaborate with one another.

Online course administrators may achieve greater enrollment and retention rates in online seminars by encouraging and supporting both students and instructors. Online administrators may define the extent of interaction in online seminars as policy in the faculty handbook.

Policy makers and administrators may wish to use these findings to develop a policy on mandatory online seminars. The policy may be devised in an effort to improve communication, course design, curriculum, and delivery methods. 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 online seminars with regard to: (a) academic level of online courses, specifically graduate level course in

comparison to undergraduate level courses and (b) the academic strands of disciplines (e.g., education, information technology, language arts).

In conclusion, the alternative hypothesis was accepted that stated that there is a significant difference in the postings mean between faculty members and students before and after the implementation of the online seminars policy on communication. These findings provide evidence that intervention programs can improve communication in the online learning environment.

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