

Student Competition in Computer-Mediated Conferencing Courses

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Abstract: The current study explores student perspectives on competition in asynchronous computer conferencing courses. A survey was distributed to 57 students enrolled in graduate-level distance education programs. Nine of these students participated in extensive interviews. The findings indicate that students experience subtle forms of competition while participating in their online courses. Most manifestations of competition appear to have few educational benefits. It is posited that marking schemes that focus on individual accomplishments may increase feelings of competition and undermine efforts to foster collaborative practices. To reduce the negative effects of competition, course instructors may need to develop assessment strategies that reward group, rather than individual, accomplishments.

Introduction

Recent studies of computer-mediated conferencing (CMC) courses have begun to uncover some of the complex social and cultural factors that influence online interaction. The purpose of this investigation is to research the role that competition plays in students' online exchanges. The topic of competition, although studied extensively in face-to-face classrooms (especially at the elementary and secondary level) has received relatively little attention in CMC contexts. Yet there is good reason to believe that even in the most well designed courses, competitive pressures for grades can have an effect on how students interact with their peers. The goal of the current study is to examine student experiences of competition, and to explore how these experiences shape learner attitudes and behaviors.

Theoretical Framework

Few studies have investigated the role of competition in asynchronous CMC. This may be due, in part, to an assumption that competition is not an important factor. There is currently no concrete evidence suggesting that students perceive their online courses to be less competitive than face-to-face ones. However, there are reasons to believe that online contexts eliminate at least some of the competitive pressures that students experience in regular classrooms. The pressure to perform is one such example. Regular classroom discussion is constrained by time and by social conventions such as turn taking, which regulates how many people can speak at once (Tannen, 1989). Online environments, on the other hand, are more equalizing in the sense that everyone can participate whenever they wish. There is no competition for the floor (Harasim, 1990; Althaus, 1997) and interruptions are impossible (Althaus, 1997). Even the pressures of impromptu contributions are eliminated (Wegerig, 1998) because CMC allows people time to reflect before committing their ideas to the public space (Mason & Kaye, 1990; Jaffee, 1997). Thus, the very design of CMC environments is thought to reduce competition in favor of more egalitarian participation patterns and collaborative peer engagement (Eastmond, 1992).

Despite the aforementioned advantages of computer conferencing, it is plausible that students still experience a sense of competition in CMC environments. Unlike face-to-face discussions, which have no permanence, the interactions that take place online are preserved for long periods of time. Each student's contribution to the class discussion is highly visible and remains available to the instructor for assessment purposes. Most CMC students are aware that the quality of their online submissions can easily be compared against those of their classmates. This arguably places more pressure on students to perform at a level that meets or exceeds the performance of their peers. Online competition may also be produced by course marking schemes. English and Yazadani (1999) point out that it is fundamentally inconsistent for an instructor to encourage students to collaborate, but to grade students individually--especially if people feel that final marks are based upon relative measures. Such a situation can promote competitive pressures that increase learner anxieties and undermine the instructor's collaborative goals. Consequently, the purpose of this research is to explore the role that competition plays in online courses. Do many students experience a sense of competition? How does it manifest itself? How do students respond to the competitive situations they encounter? By exploring these questions it is hoped that we can develop a deeper understanding of the social processes that promote and interfere with online collaborative learning.

Methods and Data Sources

Fifty-seven distance education students were recruited to take part in the study in the fall of 2004. At the time, all participants were enrolled in graduate-level distance education courses at the University of Toronto. A questionnaire was distributed to identify some of the more widely held online practices shared by the participants. Follow-up interviews with nine of the participants provided the researchers with in-depth perspectives of learners' perceptions of competition in their online courses.

Results

Data analyses revealed that many students perceive their online courses to be competitive environments. Competition was evident in students' participation habits, and manifested in how they submitted discussion notes.

Participating Early

In their interviews, students frequently commented on the importance of participating early in the discussion forum. Early participation, it was felt, enabled them to gain the floor and influence the direction of the discussion. One student, Dave, remarked how staying up late allowed him early access into the online discussions. His strategy was as follows: "At 12:01 after the instructor had posted something I was the first person to respond, and that influenced the discussion. It was an experiment, and it demonstrated to me that this was in fact, the correct way to go." Natalie explained that early participation provided increased chances of posting "correct" responses. She explains: "As soon as an assignment or a question is posted by the instructor, if you're early to answer it, then you're more likely to get it right because there are really only 1 or 2 possible right answers."

Volume of Posts

Competition also seemed to affect the number of discussion messages that students contributed. In their questionnaire responses, 82.5% of participants responded that they felt pressured to contribute a certain number of notes to the conference (see Figure 1). This is not surprising, since many online courses award a grade for participation. When gauging their performance, many students felt it was necessarily to compare their participation levels against those of their classmates. As Katherine explains:

I leave no stone unturned and that's probably irritating to some people who don't have the time. [Other students] can be very annoyed when they think that somebody's postings have said it all or raised the bar for the week, or left them scrambling to come up with additional brilliant comments for the professor. I have sympathy for that. If I were working 9 to 5 and I came home on Friday nights to do my postings and the folders were absolutely chock-full, what am I going to say?

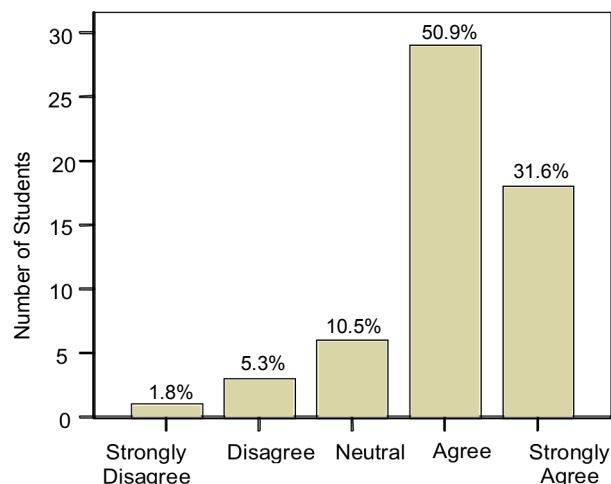


Figure 1. "I feel pressured to regularly contribute a certain number of notes to the class discussions." (N=57)

Quality of Posts

In their interview responses, many participants reported feeling concerned about the quality of their discussion messages. In their survey responses, 86% of participants admitted feeling pressured to make significant

intellectual advances that pushed discussions to a deeper level. More often than not, this pressure was associated to the grade awarded for online discussions. Deidre described a practical aspect of her online participation:

If you're getting marked on things, then you're going to do a bang-up job but if there's no mark, you're just kind of reading through things. That's the reality of university; it's based on marks. You want to do what your professor says so you can get the marks and pass, especially when you're paying \$900 for the course.

Competition also affected writing style. To some students, notes were like "mini essays", messages that reflect a student's work and effort in the course. To impress the instructor, many students felt it was necessary to include references to course readings in their notes in order to distinguish themselves. As Jennifer explains, "most people yardstick or measure themselves against other people's postings; they see how the professor may perceive them in relation to other people. You know, the difference online is that it's like you're submitting essays all the time."

Student Attitudes towards Competition

In their interviews, many students described how they felt about competition in their online courses. In many cases, students felt that feelings of competition led students to show off when participating online. In the words of one student, competition "pits individual learners against one another; it raises the risk level." Laurie, a part time student, commented that competition was detrimental to student learning. In her own words:

I don't see [online courses] as a place where you actually construct new knowledge or perhaps synthesize ideas. It's like someone will post something and people do their best to better or one-up them by inserting some kind of article link or something.

Conclusions and Educational Significance

This paper describes a variety of ways in which students perceive competition to be occurring within their CMC course. The findings support Lipponin's (2002) observation that peer collaborative learning is not always free of conflict and competition. Some forms of competition may be educationally beneficial. For example, a situation in which students compete to produce high-quality, incisive messages may be educationally advantageous for the entire class. However, most manifestations of competition have few educational benefits. Marking schemes that focus on individual accomplishments (e.g., the number of messages posted, the quality of individual messages) may exacerbate feelings of competition and undermine efforts to foster collaborative practices. In order to reduce the negative effects of competition, course instructors may need to develop assessment strategies that reward collaborative, rather than individual, accomplishments.

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