

Presentation Abstract

Ethnicity, Gender and Computer-Mediated Communication

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is often extolled for its potential to create egalitarian discourse. By eliminating social "markers" such as ethnicity and gender, the online environment will purportedly "liberate" marginalized speakers from the socially-defined barriers to their participation. However, not only does this rhetoric operate on the assumption that marginalization and silence are related--a supposition which this study challenges--but it also borders on lumping all minorities together into a single category, as if their communication styles were all one and the same. Examining the specific impediments (and advantages) faced by different cultural groups when encountering the online environment will allow us to reconsider how CMC might best be implemented in our classroom curriculum. Therefore, this study, which analyzes and compares the (synchronous) computer-mediated and oral discussions of four English classes at the University of Texas, explores the effect of discourse environment upon members of diverse ethnic and gender groups. Quantitative data measuring the amount of discourse produced by speakers are combined with qualitative data evaluating individual perceptions of the environment. Findings include the following:

- * As we might expect, Asian-Americans (of both genders) and Hispanic men contributed significantly more discourse to the computer-mediated conversations. However, this increase in participation did not reflect satisfaction with the environment: half of the Asian-Americans and 60% of the Hispanic men stated a definite preference for the oral setting while only one Hispanic male reported preferring the computer-mediated environment.
- * Caucasian women reaped the largest benefits from the computer-mediated setting. These women reported being highly satisfied with the online conversations and contributed significantly more discourse to these conversations. 40% reported feeling "more included" in the online conversations.
- * Caucasian men expressed dissatisfaction with CMC and were the group least likely to think that conversational environment affected the way they conversed. These men contributed less discourse to the electronic discussions than they did to the oral conversations (although they still contributed at rates slightly above the class average) and less than 10% reported preferring the online environment.
- * CMC had a profoundly negative impact upon the discourse of Hispanic women who contributed over 50% fewer turns and words to the computer-mediated conversations. Moreover, these women overwhelmingly reported preferring the oral environment, noting the absence of non-verbal cues and a lack of "inclusion" as factors contributing to their dissatisfaction with the computer-mediated setting.
- * Contrary to popular expectations, the two groups which were the most talkative in face-to-face discussions were African-American and Hispanic women, both of which contributed significantly more discourse than Caucasian men. However, unlike the Hispanic women, the African-Americans maintained their talkativeness in the computer-mediated environment and indicated satisfaction with this setting. This group indicated that they felt their comments were treated with more respect by their classmates in the computer-mediated discussions.

While it would be foolish to draw broad conclusions based upon a such a small sample, this study does challenge many of the assumptions we share about CMC and classroom discourse in general. Moreover, these findings underscore the fact that a large proportion of the researchers and advocates of CMC (like myself) are Caucasian women and caution us not to generalize from our own positive experiences with online discourse by making broad claims about its egalitarian potential.

Author: Joanna Wolfe-Migrock

Category:

Target Audience: Not Applicable

[Add your comment about this presentation](#)

[Return to the Schedule of Abstracts](#)