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Lurking in online asynchronous discussion

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Abstract

The aim of this descriptive study is to determine reasons why students don't post message to the online asynchronous discussion. Data were collected from surveys. Data from 18 checkbox items and 111 open-ended response items were analyzed. Results revealed that five reasons for lurking were emerged: no need to post, not being capable of using software, not liking the group dynamic, thinking that others being helpful, need to learn more about the group before participating. Generally in this study findings show that students prefer to be lurker through their interaction and experiences with the community.
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1. Introduction

Student participation in online learning is mostly measured by counting the number of postings to a discussion board. In fact just sending message is not satisfactory indicator for participation. Taylor's (2002) study which examines the participation pattern in online asynchronous discussion board shows that there are three sub-participation groups in computer mediated communication setting: worker, lurker, shirker. The Proactive Participation Group ("The Workers") contained students who contributed an above average number of postings to the Discussion Board and also visited that part of the site regularly. These students were continuously involved in discussions and were often among the first to post a message, and to respond quickly to other messages, thereby creating "threads" of ongoing dialogue between students. In contrast, the Peripheral Participation Group ("The Lurkers") included students who contributed less than the average number of postings to the Discussion Board, but at the same time participated regularly in the discussion in "read only" mode. Finally, the Parsimonious Participation Group ("The Shirkers") contributed only one third of the average number of postings or less to the Discussion Board, and similarly visited this part of the site on less than fifty percent of the group average.

Lurkers or in other words students who observe written communication ignored because student participation was mostly measured the number of message posted to the discussion board. It means that only tip of the iceberg come up to the researches. Rafaeli, Ravid, & Soroka (2004) also suggest this assertion. As online groups grow in number and type, understanding lurking is becoming increasingly important. Recent reports indicate that lurkers make up over 90% of online groups, yet little is known about them (Katz, 1998; Mason, 1999). Without insight into

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lurkers, our understanding of online groups is incomplete. Ignoring, dismissing, or misunderstanding lurking distorts knowledge of life online and may lead to inappropriate design of online environments (Nonnecke & Preece, 2001). All these factors undoubtly necessiate conducting of the current study, -seeking the reasons of- lurking in online courses.

2. Method

2.1. Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive research design in asynchronous interactions in online courses of the English Language Teaching Program. In view of the descriptive nature of the case, just quantitative data were collected. To establish the conceptual framework of the study, a survey research, were conducted. A survey method is directed toward determining the reasons of lurking.

2.2. The Sample and Data Collection

The study was carried out with a population of 2,767 senior students enrolled in the online courses of the English Language Teaching Program in the Open Education Faculty, Anadolu University. Data was collected with survey administration. This survey was developed by Nonnecke and Preece (2001) and contains 19 checkbox items. This type of answer format enables respondents to select one or more items from a set of predefined options. Additionally, participants had chance to type their own reasons through textbox. The surveys posted to students in Turkey via The Open Education Faculty and 1,078 of them were returned.

3. Results

Sampling distribution and percentile scores for the surveys were based on a total sample of 1,078 valid data from senior students of the English Language Teaching Program. The sample was composed of 25.7 percent male students and 65.6 percent female students (see Table 1).

Table 1. Gender of Lurker (n=1,078)

Gender	n	%
Female	707	65.6
Male	277	25.7
Missing	94	8.7

As seen in Table 2 the most frequently selected reasons for not posting was "just reading/browsing is enough". Almost half of the students checked this item (48.3%), followed by "others respond the way I would" (35.8%) and "no need to post" (31.1%). The fourth ranked item was "not enough time to post" (27%), and fifth was " no intention to post" (18%). Other items' rates were changed between 1.9 percent and 14.2 percent.

These findings provide valuable insight why students didn't post messages to the discussion board. According to the results most of the students prefer to benefit from discussion board messages. Also interestingly, only 18 percent of students indicated that "they had no intention of posting from the outset". This implies that the majority of students become lurkers through their interaction and experiences with the community.

Table 2. Reasons Why Students Don't Post

Reasons Why Students Didn't Post	n	%
Didn't need to post		
Just reading/browsing is enough	521	48.3
No requirement to post	335	31.1
Had no intention of posting	194	18.0
Didn't like the group (poor dynamics)		
Long delay in response to posting	149	13.8
Poor quality of messages	88	8.2
Want to remain anonymous	71	6.6
Shy about posting	65	6.0
Of no value to me	61	5.7
Concern about agressive or hostile response	43	4.0
If I post, I am making a commitment	34	3.2
Wrong group for me.	21	1.9
Couldn't make the software work		
Not enough time to post	291	27.0
There are too many messages already	153	14.2
My work does not allow posting	104	9.6
Do not know how to post message.	99	9.2
Thought I was being helpful		
Others respond the way I would	386	35.8
Noting to offer	88	8.2
Needed to find out about the group		
Still learning about the group	42	3.9

When we considered the population of senior students (n=2767), 38.9 percent of these students checked this survey and almost half of these students didn't need to post message to the discussion board. Most part of these students just read postings to take necesseray information, and they didn't need to communicate with others.

Looking at "didn't like the group" category, of all the participant students, 13.8 percent complained of long delays in response to posting. Otherwise interestingly, just 1.9 percent of the students thought that those who were in the discussion environment were not the right group for themselves. This finding shows that there isn't any problem of student belonging to the group. But there is a problem in effective working of the discussion board. Also "still learning about the group" has weak percentage (3.9%) to support this assertion.

When we look at the "couldn't make the software work" category, students didn't post message for the reasons of not enough time and too many messages. These findings indicate that students have problems about time management and using computer and internet.

As can be seen in Table 2, "Others respond the way I would" was the second most selected item. The reason behind this selection could be the fact that the discussion environment is mostly used for question and answer purposes. Since these questions were generally at information and comprehension level, they had only one true answer. Thus the students participation were at a alower level.

Open-ended 111 responses analysis generally supported these five main reasons. Especially students' responses were focused around "not enoug time" and "long delay in response to posting".

4. Discussion

Hallet and Cummings (1997) stated that students who were lost in cyber space have negative thought about sending message. Lack of immediate feedback and visual cues play an important role to foster such of thougts. Hobaugh (1997) indicated that problems in social dynamics caused ineffective group action in distance education. Problems in social dynamics were also recognized as a key barrier for effective asynchronous discussion in online courses (Wegerif, 1998). Wegerif posited that individual success or failure on the course depended on students' feelings of being either an outsider or an insider.

Generally in this study findings show that students prefer to be lurkers through their interaction and experiences with the community. Almost half of the students said they lurked because "just reading/browsing is enough". The reasons for this behavior may be more complex. Perhaps students who say "just reading/browsing is enough" don't feel comfortable themselves for posting or fear making a commitment. Bento et al. (2005) determine that lurkers may prefer to lurk depending on too many reasons. They stated that those who will have to use a second language other than their mother tongue while expressing themselves will be feeling uncomfortable. However people who

have fear to communicate with others in computer mediated communication settings prefer to be brief and/or not to communicate (Laura, 2004). All of these information and findings of this study show that there are many reasons why students lurk in online discussion communities.

5. Conclusion

It is commonly argued that a key challenge for online learning is to encourage learner participation.There is growing evidence that increased participation (in quality and quantity) can increase learning and that instructors can control a series of elements in course design and delivery that may result in increased participation (Harasim et al, 1995; Kemery, 2000). Also establishing and sustaining a good climate in online environment suitable for the creation of learning community become important issues to consider. Both students' and teachers' communication behaviors are crucial in creating a good climate for learning. For this reason lurkers must be investigated to create effective learning community. According to these findings students have too many reasons for lurking. By contacting early and often the low visibility students, an instructor can help a student move from being a lurker to be an active learner.

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