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Case Study Project
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Odyssey of Discovery:

Chronicle of a Descent into the World of Online Discourse, a Cautionary Tale

Azusa Pacific University, a private Christian university in California, has several innovative options in their Educational Technology Master's program. Students can follow a traditional (f2f) path, an online distance program, and a hybrid program, which is a combination of online and face-to-face. Students in the hybrid program may be located at several campuses, but completing the program as a group, so that some students have been in classes together, and some have only met online.

In the Fall of 2004, students from both the Online program and the hybrid program meet in Educational Psychology, an online course taught by Dr. Ray Gen. Numbers of students from the two programs are basically even, ten to nine. The Online students (10) are in their final quarter before graduation, and have formed a strong group identity. Some students not in the Cadre are acquainted, for some it is their first online class, and they are new to the program.

The class portal is in eCollege, and the central activity is asynchronous discussion in discussion threads. Communication also takes place synchronously in two TappedIn sessions, and private conversations are an option during synchronous chat. Students are able to email the instructor or individual students through the eCollege interface, and most students have an IM name known to class members and teacher.

As a member of the Cadre, I was assigned to complete a Case Study, investigating an aspect of Internet discourse, and to apply it to Educational Psychology. I set out to study gender bias, and to collect data by visiting online communities. I visited IRC chat, AIM chat, TappedIn sessions, and online forums. In trying to study Internet chat, I had limited success. Because my platform is Mac, newsgroups, Yahoo Chat, and MSN Chat: were not compatible. As my focus was gender study, I established three alter identities: Buck,

PaisleyC, and MisterBobbyL. Buck and MisterBobbyL were IM screen names. PaisleyC and MisterBobbyL were created as members of TappedIn, an educational community. On the way I learned a little about the topic of gender in the online environment, but learned more about what lurks in the online world. [an intriguing introduction](#)

IRC Chat

As “Buck,” I accessed IRC chat through my browser. What I found was a **lawless frontier**, and I did not have the credentials or language to infiltrate it. Listed were dalnet, efnet, freenode, hybridnet, moznnet, quakenet, slashnet, undernet, and webbnnet. Many IRC clients have web presences as well, where you can often participate in discussion forums, but not chat. Mozilla (<http://forums.mozillazine.org/groupcp.php>) and Freenode (<http://freenode.net/groups.shtml>) are in this category.

Most of the IRCs did not connect. Moznnet is for Mozilla developers, testers, and users only (and included the message: consume - be silent – die), and undernet did not let me in. I was successful in entering dalnet. After lurking a bit, I was asked a question, and when I was slow to answer, the respondent replied to others that I was stupid and slow, and they all left the room.

I was able to access freenode, which is a great IRC chat network, and can be accessed at <http://freenode.net/>, a service of Peer-Directed Projects Center. It has 20,000 users, and contains a wide variety of project channels. It seems that when you sign on you land in whatever server picks you up. The first time I joined a group of academics in Sweden working on a project I did not understand, but was not confronted. The second time I tried freenode.net, I landed at leguin.freenode.net, a “world” in Sweden with “10106 victims and 10385 hiding on 24 servers,” and did not care to stay. This “host” was not on the “participating groups” list. [looks like you landed in developer/hacker IRC... they are an exclusive bunch.](#)

The most harrowing group I found was “quakenet.” I soon discovered that this was a group for hackers, as was “slashnet.” The policy stated, “By connecting to this network you give us permission to probe your machine for open proxies/wingates.” It appeared to me they were waiting to lure the innocent into their lair

to take over their computers, and I “hightailed” it out of there. That concluded my experience with IRC chat, where I hope to never stray again.

AIM Chat

The only chat that was user-friendly was at AIM. There were many groups available, though they were not moderated. Every room, even Computing, Pets, and Family Chat, load a long list of “messages” from users who appear to be in the room, but I have finally learned are ads. These are mostly sexual in nature, and invite you to go to other sites to look at...whatever: pics or webcams of them doing disgusting things. It is possible to click “ignore” to block each user, but there are many of them and new ones continue to appear. By typing in “Are there any real people here?” I had several ordinary conversations. I was “gender bending,” or masquerading as the opposite sex, with a male presence (MisterBobbyL, a community college student and special ed aide who hopes to be a policeman). I found it impossible to “invent” my personality on the fly and be consistent, so I based my identity on a real person. I only once needed to describe my identity, but it was helpful to remember who I purportedly was. It was quite difficult to communicate knowing I was being dishonest. On each occasion, I came very close to divulging my true identity. But what would that have accomplished but to make my partners more wary of chat?

[so what did you learn from your masquerade?](#)

A curious thing sometimes happens when a user invites you to a private chat. Though I was in Family Chat, I would often get invitations to chat from a user I assumed to be in the Family Chat room, but on reading the fine print was really in a room, not on the AIM list, called LiveCams. I expect many users are tricked in this way.

Signed in as PaisleyC, my female mask, I received messages that were suggestive, and questions that were probing for personal info. Once I/she entered into a private conversation, which quickly became a sexual invitation. As MisterBobbyL, this never happened Once, though, I/he had a conversation with a female student from Mt. SAC, our local community college, that had more swear words than not, and learned that a/s/l means age/sex/location, not American Sign Language. All the students used many swear words, but their conversation was harmless.

As a male character, I did notice a marked change in how people responded. There was not a lot of chitchat, and I felt that questions were more respectful and serious than they would have been had I been a woman. Some of the people I talked to (chris6golden, Farnsy, FhatBuddha), I suspect were kids, and had names that did not identify their gender. One (VeronicaGo4Pro) was a parent who asked me to type a few swear words so she could test her new net nanny, but I did not even feel comfortable with that, and declined! (At first I was wary of her intentions). I did give her some pointers on how to monitor her thirteen-year-old daughter's computer usage, and that was still consistent with my mask's identity.

I entered TappedIn sessions, using two masks, PaisleyC and MisterBobbyL. Each had their own profiles as school employees. I was not able to identify any difference in how they were responded to by their gender, except that MisterBobbyL's responses seemed to be treated a little more seriously, but since the discussions and participants were different, the control was not consistent. I would assume that as TappedIn is a community of educators, and the purpose for conversation is professional, that gender is not an issue, or only slightly. I have long attended the Social Studies Forum at TappedIn, and never noted a bias of gender. I believe that had I not been looking for gender differences in eCollege and TappedIn, I would not have noticed them.

Forums

I discovered fascinating discussions in Google and Yahoo groups, but chat was not supported for my Mac. I was most comfortable in the computer, especially the Mac, forums. One option I investigated was the community of Gor, featured in our textbook, and based on books by John Norman. The url for one source is <http://www.worldofgor.com/iform>. I did not participate in the discussion, only read the posts. Considering that it is a male dominant society, and the predominant topic is the slave girl fantasy, I was surprised at the number of female (or female presenting?) participants. [Reach any conclusions?](#)

Distance Learning

In our online classes, while we are clearly equal in voice, I have observed at times when conflict or leadership is needed, and risk to be taken, it is often one of the "boys" who steps forward. I noticed this

most clearly with our online conversation with Dr. Gen, on November 29, regarding our Case Study assignment. Though we had all agreed ahead of time to seek to modify or even eliminate this assignment, John took the lead, and the rest of us stepped back, though we were waiting to back him up in case he needed it. Tom was to be his first support, followed by others as needed. There were several active private conversations between Cadre members during the session, with Elizabeth coordinating as always, and we planned our strategy and agreed on what we wanted to express, with John as our spokesman.

There were no notable differences regarding gender in our Ed Psych class, until I studied responses in our of our discussion threads, the first one on Integration of Values. I noted that there were indeed more aligned variants (statements in support of the speaker) from women, and more opposed variants (statements in opposition) proportionately from the men. In our class, 63 percent are women, and 37 percent men, but 73 percent of aligned variants came from women, as opposed to 26 percent from men. This supports the premise of the book that they are not “opposite sexes,” but there is a significant difference. (Wallace, p. 208). Wallace also posits that in some situations, men talk more than women, but our threads did not bear that out. Another observation I did find to be true: Wallace observes that in conversation, men rarely interrupt. One speaks until finished, and then another speaks. Women, however, present a more collaborative form of conversation, overlapping their speech, finishing others’ sentences, adding supportive comments in the middle of a sentence (p. 214). Remembering our sessions in TappedIn, I would agree with that assessment, though it would be easier to substantiate in an audio environment.

According to Herring, “studies have shown that men have a tendency to be more aggressive in online discussions. When this occurs, women have a tendency to withdraw from the discussion, which leads to an online learning opportunity lost (Smith). This tendency appeared to a slight degree in our TappedIn sessions, and I would assume would be much more prevalent in groups without an established community. Our text often states that the majority of Internet users are male, but I did not find that to be true in the places I visited, though often nicks did not reveal gender.

Another issue in our online class that appeared quite quickly was that of group dynamics. There was clearly an “Ingroup,” the Cadre members who had worked together for many months. When a conflict arose regarding an assignment (this one) the Cadre banded together, but the remainder of the class, without a prior history, did not follow. This created a (temporary) environment of distrust between the Cadre group, and the hybrid group, who were in fact a group only by default, an out-group as opposed to the “Ingroup,” or we could say group and non-group. As time went on, however, the class started to form its own “groupness” and now exists amicably. Another situation arose out of the first, so that some students in the class came to believe that the instructor was masquerading as a student in the class, and receiving emails thought to be sent only to class members. This situation contributed to the atmosphere of distrust and perceived deception. Though identity masking is expected in chat rooms and anonymous environments, a relationship of trust builds in an online community, and once breached, feelings of suspicion, betrayal, and distrust increase. While not ultimately significant, this episode was a valuable experience in interpersonal relationships in online communities that class members will be able to apply to future educational experiences.

Findings and Conclusions

Through these investigations, though I did not feel competent or comfortable in “chat,” I did gain insights that will help navigation in online interactions. As we utilize the internet more for student projects, it is crucial for educators to be aware of the environment students may encounter, and to provide some guidance in online safety, instructing students on what is safe, and how to be aware and wary of what they encounter.

good point

I was very apprehensive during all these adventures about the security of my machine, personal identity and information. Though I have security software, I felt very vulnerable to hackers. This was a challenging experience, but I would have preferred some kind of “Chat 101” lesson, to access and participate in these resources safely and appropriately. Some tips on conversation would help, as people in chat rooms seem to speak a different language, one that includes many acronyms and abbreviations.

good point... but there are so many different chats, each with its own set of behavioral rules and language. But a general overview would have been useful to you. (Most of the class did not go to chat rooms - that was only one of many possibilities.

I personally disliked this experience, and felt dishonorable in fooling people. The masquerade the book refers to as “role play” feels to me like lying. I can see that it might be a broadening experience for children, to play a fictionalized role much as they would onstage. For me, it felt like lying and deception. However, by experiencing pitfalls, obstacles, and varied environments I have constructed far more lasting knowledge than I ever would have by reading alone, and will be comfortable teaching these concepts to students and staff. [So it was a useful experience? Dishonesty was not the goal. Most of your classmates did other studies. You could have done something else.](#)

Works Cited

Smith, Janet. The Issue of Gender in Online Teaching and Learning, Retrieved January 15, 2005 from <http://pdc.cvc.edu/common/article.asp?entry=1&idx=1291>

Wallace, Patricia. (1999.). *The Psychology of the Internet*. Cambridge University Press.

[You have made a good introductory study on this important topic. The IRCs, Chats, TappedIns, etc are not going away. To be sure they will be transformed as the technology changes, but these virtual places should be understood by educators because they are being used more and more by our students. For the first time since it's creation, TV viewing has decreased among the teens. It has been replaced by the Internet.](#)

[Good introductory case study.](#)