

Students' Perspectives on E-Moderation of Synchronous E-Argumentation (Poster)

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Abstract

Whereas the prescriptive literature on human e-moderation is abundant (e.g., Salmon, 2000), empirical research is sparse and it has mainly focused on the facilitation of e-courses and moderation of a-synchronous discussion formats (e.g., Anderson, Garrison, Rourke & Archer, 2001), but not on moderation in synchronous discussion environments. In this presentation we report on findings from an exploratory study into students' perspectives on what constitutes effective moderation of synchronous e-argumentation. We compare the responses of one junior high school sample (N=74) and one graduate student sample (N=16) with existing findings in the moderation literature according to the taxonomy of moderation support proposed by Lund (2004). All students had participated in a moderated argumentative discussion, using discussion software named Digalo (<http://zeno8.ais.fraunhofer.de/digalo/index.htm>).

In contrast to face-to-face (Yackel, 2002) and a-synchronous discussion formats (e.g., Packham, et al, 2006), interaction support, such as encouraging the rate of participation, controlling turn-taking and encouraging responsiveness (Lund, 2004), was hardly mentioned in either sample. Unlike in face-to-face channels, synchronous on-line communication allows for simultaneous posting of messages and the need for supervising such interaction aspects of the discussion are reduced. In contrast with a-synchronous learning environments, on the other hand, it seems that in synchronous, co-located settings interaction support is less needed, since participants are simultaneously on-line and are dedicated to interaction for a certain pre-defined time interval.

In both samples students expect a good moderator to scaffold their reasoning and knowledge construction and to keep the discussion focused. Other aspects of pedagogical support, however, such as providing expert advice and feedback (Lund, 2004; Packham, et al., 2006) were not mentioned or explicitly called undesirable. Among the junior high school students, more than half of the boys, but almost none of the girls, either clearly indicated that they did not want teacher moderation or that they gave reasons both in favor and against it. The majority of the reasons mentioned for this resistance alluded to student autonomy. Students also frequently mentioned aspects of social support, such as the importance of a good moderator to maintain a supportive relation with the discussants, be objective and create a pleasant atmosphere. Taken together, these findings seem to emphasize the importance of teacher/tutor impartiality and objectivity. According to them, moderators of synchronous argumentation should scaffold reasoning, without revealing or imposing any personal opinions on the discussion.

The potential differences between tutor (graduate sample) and teacher (high school sample) moderation are discussed in the presentation.

Keywords: E-moderation, argumentation, synchronous discussion environments, student perceptions.

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