

## **Online Conferencing: Variations on Structure and Participation\***

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**Abstract:** This paper looked at the variation of structure and participations for online conferences. Four different structural models were used in designing the conferences, which were (1) Open-ended discussions by expert, (2) Scaffolded discussion with facilitated follow-up, (3) Scaffolded discussion without facilitated follow-up, and (4) Open-ended discussion without facilitated follow-up. Data were collected on frequency of messages, word count of messages, and key word analysis for themes. The findings will provide comparative and descriptive data related to conference structures, participant variables, and levels of participation for future research in online conferencing.

### **Use of Online Conferencing as a Vehicle for Training Special Educators**

There is evidence that materials designed to assist teachers in working with students with behavioral problems are currently in high demand. The design and development of the Internet as a delivery medium for such continuous training in both preservice and inservice teacher education has been documented in special education (Smith, Martin, & Lloyd, 1998). A team of researchers, funded by a U.S. Department of Education grant, has been hosting a series of online conferences for preservice and inservice educators under the auspices of the Virtual Resource Center in Behavioral Disorders (Fitzgerald & Semrau, 1998-2000). These virtual conferences involve the participation of national experts in the behavioral disorders field for the purpose of providing in-depth discussion of topics and social discourse regarding the application of the information.

### **Design and Structure of the Virtual Conferences**

Four different structural models were used in designing the online conferences. Each conference ran for two weeks, but the degree of openness and structure, involvement of the online expert, and the use of discussion facilitators differed across the conferences.

**Conference #1:** Open-ended Discussion by Expert. 95 participants; 477 messages.

One expert online for two-week duration with all participants in one large discussion group; no required pre-conference preparation or readings; messages not organized by themes or available via archives.

**Conference #2:** Scaffolded Discussion with Facilitated Follow-up. 105 participants; 283 messages.

One expert online for first week with all participants in large group; participants grouped into four smaller discussion groups directed by project facilitators for second week; required writing of a case scenario; suggested readings offered via web site; messages organized by themes and available on web archives.

\*Peng, H., Fitzgerald, G., & Semrau, L. (2000). Online conferencing: Variations on structure and participation. Proceedings of Ed-Media 2000 World Conference on Educational Multimedia and Hypermedia.

**Conference #3:** Scaffolded Discussion without Facilitated Follow-up. 37 participants; 155 messages.

One expert online for first week with all participants in large group; participants continued discussion for second week without expert or facilitators; pre-conference self-evaluation encouraged; suggested readings offered via web site; messages organized by themes and available on web archives.

**Conference #4:** Open-ended Discussion without Facilitated Follow-up.

Three national facilitators for first week with all participants in one large discussion group; participants continue for second week without national or project facilitators; no required pre-conference contributions required; free CD-ROM provided prior to conference containing suggested software and resources for viewing; messages organized by themes and available on web archives; greater mix of field teachers participating with preservice teachers.

## **Preliminary Findings & Importance of the Work**

The findings reveal equivalent levels of participation regardless of prior computer experience, teaching experience, access to equipment, typing skills, learning styles, writing anxiety, or frequency of e-mail and Internet use. Writing anxiety may play a role in length of message but not frequency of responding. Graduate students demonstrate significantly higher levels of participation compared to undergraduate students. Less structured conferences allow participants to initiate more of their own topics of concern. Instructors have an important role in providing technical assistance. Instructors and course requirements impact participation and authenticity of involvement of preservice participants. Readings provide common ground for discussion. Written scenarios can be requested from participants, but they emerge naturally. Structure and facilitation provide an even level of participation and ongoing discussion. Messages must be archived by threads for asynchronous access.

This research provides a comparison of online participation during conferences that differ in open-ended vs. scaffolded features and the use of facilitation. Online conferencing appears to be a valid and valued method of providing preservice and inservice training, but the variables of designing and running virtual conferences are more of an art than a science at this stage of research. These studies will provide comparative, descriptive data related to conference structure, participant variables, and levels of participation to guide future research in this mode of instruction.

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