



# Examining Discourse Within Online Discussions of Ethical Dilemmas

Carol Dudding<sup>1</sup>, Filip Loncke<sup>2</sup>, Mani Aguilar<sup>2</sup>, Ji eun Kim<sup>2</sup>  
ASHA 2006 Miami

<sup>1</sup> Communication Disorders Program – Longwood University, 201 High Street, Farmville, VA 23909  
<sup>2</sup> Communication Disorders Program, University of Virginia, 2205 Fontaine Avenue, Charlottesville, VA 22903



## Ethical Dilemmas

Dilemma 1: You have been working with Dominic for a while. He has cerebral palsy and no functional speech. The AAC assessment that you have requested have proposed the use of a speech-generating device for Dominic. His trial with the communication device has opened up a new world for him! For the first time he is able to communicate with others using speech output. It will allow Dominic to say and ask everything he wants and greatly add to his independence. While in the early stages of learning to use the device, Dominic accidentally hits the speech buttons and generates speech that is often irrelevant, too loud, and, frankly, disruptive for the class. One of the teachers routinely has another child turn off Dominic's communication device during instructional times. Several of the teachers question whether Dominic really needs it. They believe he can learn as much just by listening and have the speech output turned off, and we should not use the device at all. That makes administrators question whether the expense of the device is worthwhile. As the speech language pathologist, what should you do?

Dilemma 2: You and your clients are asked to participate in an experiment. The experiment is harmless (IRB approval etc.) but it takes away considerable time from the treatment that you have planned for your clients. Still, you feel that your participation will lead to a better understanding of the nature of the disorder and that, in the long run, more clients will benefit from this. What should you do?

Dilemma 3: You work in a rehabilitation center as a speech language pathologist. One day you are asked to evaluate a client who has suffered a stroke and has no functional speech. The client and her husband are close friends of your parents. Soon after your evaluation, you have been able to give her a communication device that allows her to express simple messages with picture symbols. The training goes well. She is able to express basic ideas with fair reliability. She is attempting to communicate verbally with some success. One day, she points to the symbol for "John" (her husband) and makes a vehement gesture. Is she trying to tell you that her husband hits her? At first, you find it hard to believe but the thought keeps bothering you. What should you do?

## Purpose of the study

The study attempts to answer the following questions:

- Do students demonstrate a change in ethical decision making as a result of participation in the on-line discussions?
- Do the characteristics of the facilitator have a significant effect on the quantitative aspects of responses?
- Do the characteristics of the facilitator have a significant effect on the qualitative nature of responses?

## Methodology

Forty three graduate students in speech language pathology from graduate programs across the country were randomly assigned to one of three groups. One group was facilitated by a **content-matter expert (CME)**, one group by a **non-content matter expert (NCME)** and one group had **no facilitator (no fac)**. Three dilemmas were discussed over a period of three weeks. All groups discussed the same dilemma for one week before beginning the next dilemma. Students posted their responses in a text based format which were archived for later analysis. Students completed pre and post discussion questionnaires to ascertain emotional impact, professional involvement and feelings of efficacy related to each dilemma.

**Between group differences** in student responses were analyzed in terms of quantitative parameters such as number of postings, number of words per posting and changes in perceptions. Responses were analyzed using discourse analysis methods to give evidence of changes in complexity and nature of responses.

## References

Aviv, R. (2000). Educational performance of ALN via content analysis. *The Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 4 (2).

Garrison, R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical thinking in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2 (2-3), 87-105.

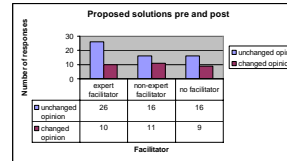
Garrison, R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2001). Critical thinking, cognitive presence and computer conferencing in distance education. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 15 (1), 7-23.

Haidt, J (2001). "The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment". *Psychological Review* 108(4).

Rourke, L., Anderson, T., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. (1999). Assessing social presence in asynchronous, text-based computer conferencing. *Journal of Distance Education*, 14 (3), 51-70.

## Results

**Do students demonstrate a change in ethical decision making as a result of participation in the on-line discussions?**



Degrees of freedom: 2  
Chi-square = 1.21049638143891  
Chi-square should be greater than or equal to 5.99.  
The distribution is not statistically significant.

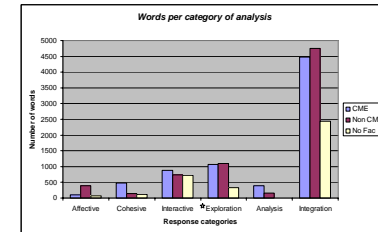
**Do the characteristics of the facilitator have a significant effect on the quantitative aspects of responses?**  
Post Hoc testing (Tukey HSD and Scheffe) employing ANOVA suggests that there was no significant difference at .05 level in the number of postings for the three groups. There was no significant difference in the number of words per posting for the group facilitated by CME or NCME. There was a significant difference between the number of words per posting for the NCME and No fac groups.

| gp        | gp     | Mean difference | Std Error   | Sig.      |      |
|-----------|--------|-----------------|-------------|-----------|------|
| Tukey HSD | cme    | no fac          | -248.41429  | 133.16027 | .166 |
|           | no fac | cme             | 130.17460   | 137.40790 | .615 |
| Scheffe   | cme    | no fac          | 248.41429   | 133.16027 | .166 |
|           | no fac | cme             | -378.58889* | 147.77079 | .040 |
| no fac    | cme    | no fac          | -130.17460  | 137.40790 | .615 |
|           | no fac | cme             | 378.58889*  | 147.77079 | .040 |

\* significant at .05

**Do the characteristics of the facilitator have a significant effect on the qualitative nature of responses?** The students' postings exhibited a broad range of categories of usage. Post Hoc testing (Tukey HSD and Scheffe) employing ANOVA suggests that there was no significant difference at .05 level in the number of words posted for each of the categories employed by all three groups, with one exception. The No Fac group evidenced significantly less words posted in the category of "Exploration."

| First Level  | Second Level         | Description   |
|--|----------------------|---|
| Social Process (Rourke, et al. 2001)                 | Affective Response   | Responses that include emotional/affective content  |
|  | Cohesive Response    | Indication of building group cohesion and having a sense of group commitment                        |
|  | Interactive Response | Indication of open communication, attentiveness and interaction among members                       |
| Cognitive Process (Garrison, et al. 2001; Aviv 2000) | Exploration          | The exploration of information and ideas  |
|  | Analysis/Integration | The analysis of information and ideas<br>The connection of ideas and the construction of resolution |



## Discussion

The results of the study suggest that graduate students did not change their views of the ethical dilemma as a result of participation in an online discussion. These findings were consistent across all three conditions of facilitation (content matter expert, non-content matter expert and no facilitator). Other findings suggest that the nature of the facilitation did not significantly affect the number of posting or number of words per posting; with the exception that the group without a facilitator posted significantly fewer words. The "no facilitator" group evidenced significantly fewer instances of exploration of ideas than the other groups. Overall findings suggest that the use of a facilitator, whether they have knowledge of the content or not, yields a lengthier responses with greater exploration of ideas. It is not clear that participation in online discussion forums yields changes in the clinical decision making capacity of graduate clinicians. This may be influenced by the nature of the ethical dilemmas presented. More research is needed in this area.