

Front-Stage and Back-Stage in Hybrid E-Learning Face-to-Face Courses

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The authors analyzed online interactions in hybrid and blended courses to: (a) investigate if constructs from micro-sociology, such as self-talk, norms, and front-back-stage performance, provide a theoretical context for online interaction, and (b) compare courses with more versus fewer online components in terms of online interaction patterns. Online interaction in courses with more online components (70% online) conformed to social patterns, such as self-talk, internalization of norms and front-back-stage performance. Courses with fewer online components (30%) did not conform to social patterns, suggesting a threshold for amount of online components for students to habituate to online portions of hybrid/blended courses. Results also suggest a possible sequence of immediacy behaviors: (a) affective, (b) cohesive, and (c) interactive.

FRONT-STAGE AND BACK-STAGE IN HYBRID E-LEARNING: MICROSOCIOLOGY OF HYBRID FACE-TO-FACE ONLINE COURSES

Hybrid classes, combining online and face-to-face (FTF) have exploded onto the higher education scene. Instructors, wanting to include some advantages of e-learning in their FTF classes, add online discussions and other e-learning activities to their courses. When the time comes to participate in these online forums, faculty often feel confused. Should they respond to every student posting and send e-mails individually to students? Often there

isn't time for this! Students constantly gripe about the online requirements, demand instructor input, and persistently ask questions about what is expected in the electronic portion of the course. What is the best way to deal with challenges of e-learning and interact with students online? What social patterns are to be expected and how can an instructor improve the efficiency of his teaching and gauge the success of his online efforts? Microsociology, with concepts such as "norm internalization," "impression management," "front-stage" and "back-stage" performance can provide a down-to-earth framework to make sense of these issues of hybrid learning.

Microsociology (or symbolic interactionism) focuses on the small scale social interactions between individual people. It is driven by three premises with considerable empirical support (Blumer, 1969): (a) The *meaning* people hold for social interactions determines their attitudes about social exchanges and drives their behavior in future social interactions; (b) people derive this meaning partly by observing and interpreting how other people act; (c) but people also generate this meaning through a interpretation process called "*self-talk*," an inner role-playing dialog replaying past social encounters or rehearsing for upcoming encounters. Self-talk feeds off excess emotion from past encounters or nervousness about upcoming encounters. Thus after a particularly frustrating class meeting or online posting, a student might say to herself, "Oh, I can't believe the blankety-blank John said/wrote....Next time I'll really put him in his place by responding with....No, that wouldn't be acceptable in public. Better to put it in words that make look me professional in the eyes of the professor and improve my reputation among my student peers. Yes, that will make me also look better in a subtle way..." Self-talk dissipates excess emotion about social events and helps one prepare for future events.

Microsociology uses theatrical metaphors of "front-stage" and "back-stage" to explain how people perform "impression management" (Goffman, 1959). Front-stage is where people appear in public, neatly combed with good posture. To impress others in professional situations, people generate a public persona with correct body language, professional clothing, and sometimes even a different tonality of their voice. Back-stage is where people can relax, be themselves, "kick back and put their feet up on the couch," but also prepare for front-stage performances through self-talk.

Another fundamental principle of microsociology is norms (Garfinkel, 1967). People in groups that interact on a continuing basis share unspoken shared routines based on evolved rules about how to behave within the group. They make sense of social situations by using shorthand signs (unique to that group) to refer to classes of minor social events. To be "in" the group is to use these signs.

These sociology constructs, such as front- and back-stage and norms, come into play with virtually every individual in every human social group.

College courses are no exception. Experienced instructors reading this article may already be thinking of familiar face-to-face student and faculty behaviors that fit these social patterns. E-learning activities, whether in hybrid or fully online courses, are more of a puzzle. Online interaction appears more abstracted and disembodied. Moreover, instructors and students are less familiar with it. The hypothesis of this paper is that these same sociology constructs, front- and back-stage, apply as well to online interaction.

BACKGROUND

Instructors are comfortable in the lecture hall, being the “sage on stage,” delivering their material as they have year after year. In the less familiar online format, divested of their teaching persona, instructors interact with their students by laboriously typing text. What are the norms for instructor and student online participation? Instructors may have heard that quality interaction with the professor is the single most important factor in student satisfaction in e-learning (Shea, Swan, Fredericksen, & Pickett, 2001; Trippe, 2001). But does that mean that instructors must respond to every student posting, “holding their hands” throughout the course?

A lot of the confusion about e-learning components in hybrid courses can be resolved by looking at online activities through a microsociological framework. Instructors can then see how familiar social themes play out in both FTF and online learning activities.

Combined e-learning FTF courses go by a number of terms, including “hybrid,” “blended,” and “web-enhanced” learning. However because including online activities in FTF courses is relatively new, there is no consensus on these terms. Some educators (Kaleta & Aycok, 2004) described “web-enhanced” as a course with 20% or less online and the rest FTF. They describe “hybrid” as having more than 20%, but less than 80%, online. Anything over 80%, they consider fully online e-learning.

The authors think four distinct categories (*web-enhanced*, *blended*, *hybrid learning* and *fully online*) provide a more practical taxonomy. *Web-enhanced* courses incorporate a minimal number of web-based elements, such as the syllabus and course announcements, into an otherwise traditional FTF course. In *blended* courses, the instructor adds, beyond an online syllabus and a few online documents, some significant online learning activities. For example, a blended course might have online quizzes or have a few online discussions, which account for a certain limited percentage of the course grade. But an important point is that these online activities do not replace any of the regular FTF class meetings and account for only a limited percentage of course activities – less than 45%. If the online activities replace 45% to 80% of FTF class meetings, then the course is *hybrid*. Classes with 80% or more e-learning are considered *fully online*.

Interaction, between instructor-student and between students, is at the heart of education, whether FTF, fully online, or blended-hybrid. Critics of online learning often reject it as impersonal and socially isolating. However, e-learning is often “hyper-personal” (Swan, 2003) because of an increase in “one-to-one” style communications, such as postings in asynchronous threaded discussions read and responded to by the instructor and all of the students (Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2002).

Differences in interaction distinguish FTF and e-learning modalities. FTF courses feature instantaneous oral and gestural communication. Instructors often feel a “star” quality as they lecture to their students. The online environment divests instructors of their teaching persona, charisma, and years of FTF teaching skills. Instead e-learning involves the disembodied world of written communication. These obvious differences in interaction style set in motion less obvious events. Because of physical isolation from the instructor, lack of immediate disambiguating visual and aural cues, and a delay in the question-and-response cycle (generally a minimum of a day in asynchronous e-learning), students often feel isolated and insecure in an anonymous, online learning environment devoid of one-to-one physical interaction and emotional involvement. Therefore the most important predictor of student satisfaction in fully online and asynchronous courses is the perceived quality of one-to-one interaction with the instructor (Shea et al., 2001; Trippe, 2001). In a FTF class this is not necessarily true, since in a large lecture class, if the instructor delivers good content in a clear compelling way, students are likely satisfied, even if one-to-one interaction is minimal.

How does interaction play out in blended or hybrid classes? Because of the newness of blended and hybrid e-learning modes, there is little research to draw on. Therefore it makes sense to extrapolate from research on fully online e-learning courses.

The notion of “immediacy” of social presence has gained credence as an indicator of a healthy learning community (Swan, 2003). Three types of immediacy behaviors in e-learning have been observed: *affective*, *cohesive*, and *interactive*. Affective responses disclose emotion. Cohesive responses include others and reinforce belonging in a group. Interactive responses show that one student is paying attention to what the other is “saying” (Swan, 2003). Analyzing a graduate course in detail, Swan, Polhemus, Shih, and Rogers (2001) found that cohesive indicators declined with time and interactive indicators increased. One expects that cohesive indicators would peak once a “community” has been established and students feel more comfortable discussing course content. One wonders how this pattern variety plays out in *blended*, and *hybrid* courses. “Does immediacy in e-learning foster better learning?” Picciano (2002) found that perceived social presence was correlated with perceived learning, but not with performance in fully online courses.

Perhaps the safest conclusion is that immediacy promotes community and possibly reduces feelings of alienation, lack of identity and anonymity, common criticisms of e-learning. However there is no evidence that immediacy improves learning, as measured by conventional assessments.

A qualitative study of 20 instructors of fully online courses came up with another perspective on “immediacy” for student learning (Smith et al., 2002). A number of instructors did NOT recommend “personally getting to know their students” in the online environment, but suggested rather that student discourse about course content provided an “intellectual identity.” One instructor commented, “This is why I like the online environment. It's kind of a purified atmosphere. I only know the students to the extent of their work. Obviously their work is revealing about them.” The lack of a fleshed-out social identity can emphasize content and increase learning. An instructor commented: “I think online courses lead to a very unbiased class environment. Since you have fewer channels available for personal judgments, I believe it's easier for an instructor as well as for students to be more objective about someone's achievement.” In fact, many online instructors mentioned that students discuss much more freely in the online environment because of their ability to maintain a sphere of privacy in an otherwise public discourse. The study concluded that an initial lack of personal identity early on in the online courses later gave way to emerging intellectual identities, based on writing style and ideas (Smith et al.).

Perhaps a shortcoming of the current immediacy and interaction research with regard to learning efficacy is the lack of an overarching theoretical framework to “fit the pieces into.” The bulk of e-learning research is qualitative, descriptive case studies from which it is difficult to generalize. Microsociology constructs may provide a useful framework for research on blended, hybrid and fully online e-learning. The microsociology constructs mentioned earlier are promising. These include: (a) *self-talk*, an inner role-playing dialog replaying past social encounters or rehearsing for upcoming encounters, (b) *front-stage*, the social space where people appear in public, (c) *back-stage*, where people can relax and be themselves, but also prepare for front-stage through self-talk, and (d) *norms*, how people in groups share unspoken shared routines based on evolved rules.

Using these microsociology constructs, the investigators generated some hypotheses about online interaction within blended and hybrid courses (Table 1). To investigate these hypotheses, the authors conducted cases studies on blended and hybrid courses.

METHOD

Courses and Participants

The authors conducted the bulk study on undergraduate classes at Stony Brook University, a Research I university on Long Island, New York. Stony

Table 1
Some of the Hypotheses From the Pilot Study

Hypothesis	Short version of hypothesis
H 1: Students use "self-talk" when assessing their online <i>forum</i> postings.	H1: Students self-talk for postings.
H 2: Online <i>forums</i> are the main "front-stage" impression management outlet for students to present themselves to fellow students and the instructor, to generate positive impressions in the hope of receiving a desired grade.	H2: Online forums are student front-stage for grades.
H 3: Students prepare for "front-stage" impression management in online <i>forum</i> interaction by writing drafts or observing other student postings and instructor responses.	H3: Students prepare for front-stage forums with drafts, observing.
H 4: Over time, initial student reluctance/resistance against e-learning will be resolved when students begin making sense of online "routines."	H4: Initial resistance to online overcome.
H 5: Over time, student learning of orderly "patterns" of behavior and participation in e-learning will result in lengthier and analytically deeper but less frequent forum contributions.	H5: As students learn patterns, postings become longer and deeper, but less frequent.
H 6: Over time, students learn e-learning social "codes", resulting in a decreasing frequency of instructor feedback about course requirements and routines and a relative increase in content-related postings.	H6: Decrease in instructor postings on requirements, increase in content postings.

Brook University, a full-service public research university with both undergraduate and graduate students, is particularly known for its excellence in the sciences. The student body, with an enrollment of approximately 22,000, is exceedingly diverse, representing in large numbers many ethnic groups and nationalities.

In addition, the authors analyzed interaction patterns in one course at Adelphi University, also on Long Island. Adelphi University is well respected private four-year college with a limited number of graduate programs in select disciplines. Its student body, with an enrollment of 7,000, is also highly diverse.

From 2000 and 2005, the authors used non-probability purposive sampling methods and investigated courses from a number of different disciplines taught by ten instructors and involving 845 students. In the analysis of hybrid or blended courses, we used multiple time-series data collection over the course of 14-week semesters. The followed courses were analyzed:

1. The authors investigated two sections of a "Sociological Theory" *hybrid* course (SOC 362) taught in fall 2000 with about 70% of instruction time online and the remainder in FTF. Seventy-one (71) students' *Chat room* and *Forum* postings were analyzed. Forty-two

- (42) students returned Likert scale questionnaires testing hypotheses 1- 3.
2. The authors analyzed five *blended* courses with between 25% and 40% of course assignments online, with the remainder involving FTF class meetings. The courses investigated were different sections of a survey course “Technological Trends in Society” (EST 201) with 34 students in two Fall 2002 sections, and one section of 41 students in Spring 2003. In addition, the authors analyzed three courses taught in Spring 2005, that is, one section of a Technology and Society class on “Computer Literacy” (EST 100, $N=18$) with 25% online, an “Introductory Nursing” class at Adelphi University ($N=26$) with 40% online, and a “Technology in the Workplace” class (EST 325, $N=33$) with a 30% online.

Instruments and Procedures

To test the theoretically derived hypotheses listed in Table 1, the authors used a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods, including the use of *questionnaires*, *content analysis of postings*, and *interviews with the instructors*.

1. *Questionnaire*: Our voluntary, anonymous Likert scale questionnaire asked students to what extent they agreed or disagreed with a number of assertions derived from the microsociology constructs. Each question addressed one or more hypotheses, for example:
H1 (self-talk): “*I try to imagine what the professor would like to hear before posting my remarks*”
H2 (front-stage): “*I want others in my online class to perceive me as intelligent*”

The full version of the questionnaire is in Appendix A.

2. *Content analysis of postings*: Investigators, undergraduate and graduate research assistants conducted the content analysis. The analysis included counting, classifying, and analyzing postings from the e-learning portions of hybrid and blended courses. Investigators and research assistants examined such items as frequency of postings in online discussions and chat rooms per week or module, length of postings and posting content and complaints about assignments, and so forth.
3. *Interviews with instructors*: The investigators conducted semi-structured interviews with the instructors, once in the first half of the semester and again towards the end of the semester.

Microsociological symbolic interaction underlies this study’s hypotheses. Since symbolic interaction looks at the meaning people give to social inter-

action, it is not easily quantifiable. Therefore, the investigators used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods to triangulate on social meaning. Questionnaires provided quantitative data. Content analysis and interviews provided qualitative data.

RESULTS

In interpreting the results, readers are reminded that the authors classify blended courses as having some significant online activities, but replacing no more than 45% of the FTF activities. Hybrid classes are classified as having from 45% to 80% of FTF activities replaced with online activities.

The testing of hypotheses 1 to 3, relating to self-talk and front-stage in online forums (see Table 1), relied on questionnaires distributed to two sections of a hybrid sociology theory class and three blended classes. Particular questions addressed a specific hypothesis. For example, the item, "I try to imagine what the professor would like to hear before posting my remarks," addresses the issue of "self-talk." For the sake of brevity in the results sections, the authors generically use the term agree, without quotes, to subsume the questionnaire choices of "agree" and "somewhat agree." Similarly, disagree subsumes both "disagree" and "somewhat disagree."

Self-talk: Hypothesis 1, that students use "self talk" in assessing their online postings, was supported strongly in the hybrid class course (70% online), but not consistently supported in the blended courses (25% to 40% online). For example, 57% of students in the two sections of the hybrid course agreed that they "*imagine what the professor would like to hear before posting my remarks,*" while only 21% disagreed (see Table 2, H1). In the blended course with 30% online, 55% imagined what the professor would like to hear before posting, while only 36% did not. Support for self-talk was more modest in the other two blended courses, 35% and 39% agreed, while 54% and 50% disagreed.

Front-stage: Hypothesis 2 (that for students, online forums are front-stage for impression management/grades) was strongly supported for all classes involved (see Table 2, H2). According to questionnaire results, a majority of students in all classes perceived the online discussion (online forums) as a "front-stage" for grades and impression management.

Drafts to prepare for front-stage online forums: Hypothesis 3 (that students prepare for front-stage forums with drafts, observing, and sounding out others) was not strongly supported in any of the classes. Far less than half of the students consult with other students, wait for responses from others, or write several drafts before posting them online.

Table 2
Findings for Hypotheses #1 to #3

Left number is % of Respondents who Agree' and 'Somewhat agree' to the following questions. Right number is % of respondents who 'disagree' and 'Somewhat disagree' The difference between the sum of both numbers and 100% are undecided respondents.	Confirm (section 01/02)	SOC362 +EST325 +EST100	Nursing	Nursing	EST 325	EST 100
Estimated percentage of online interaction		Hybrid 70%	Blended 40%	Blended 32.2%	Blended 30%	Blended 25%
Number of Respondents		42	26	77	33	18
H1: Students self-talk for postings.						
"I try to imagine what the professor would like to hear before posting my remarks"	No/Yes	57/21	35/54	44/46	55/36	39/50
H2: Online forums are front-stage for impression management of student grades.						
"I try to impress the professor with my ideas"	Yes	53/18	62/19	51/30	42/42	50/22
"I want others in my online class to perceive me as intelligent"	Yes	57/12	65/27	64/16	58/12	72/6
H3: Students prepare for front-stage forums with drafts, observing.						
"Before submitting my forum responses, I usually seek the opinions of others"	No	17/71	23/54	26/61	27/70	28/56
"I wait for others to post remarks in the forum so I can get ideas before posting my own"	No	24/60	27/69	25/64	18/73	33/39
"Sometimes I find myself writing and re-writing the same forum and/or chat posting"	No	24/69	15/73	20/70	27/64	11/78

Norms and chronological patterns of online interaction: The testing of hypotheses H4, H5 and H6, relating to norms and semester-long patterns of online interaction (see Table 1), depended on structured observations and content analysis of postings.

Table 3 summarizes the content analysis of postings in the hybrid classes and the blended courses. The descriptions in cells in the five right-most columns refer to graphs constructed from content analysis. Figures 1, 2, and 3 provide a sample of graphs referenced in Table 3.

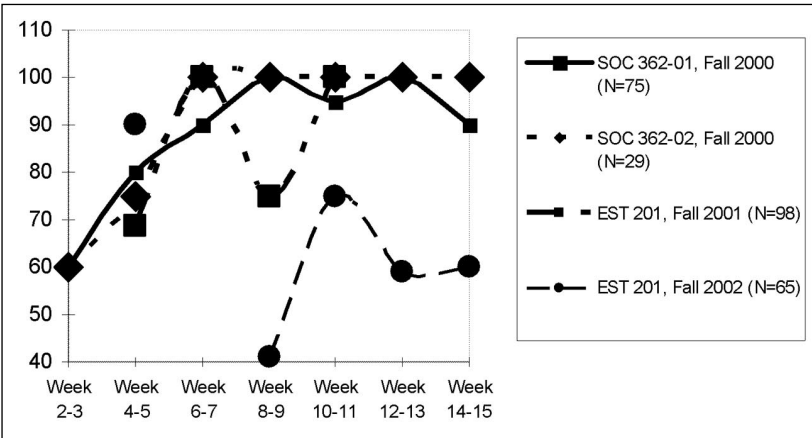


Figure 1. Professor contributions related to course content

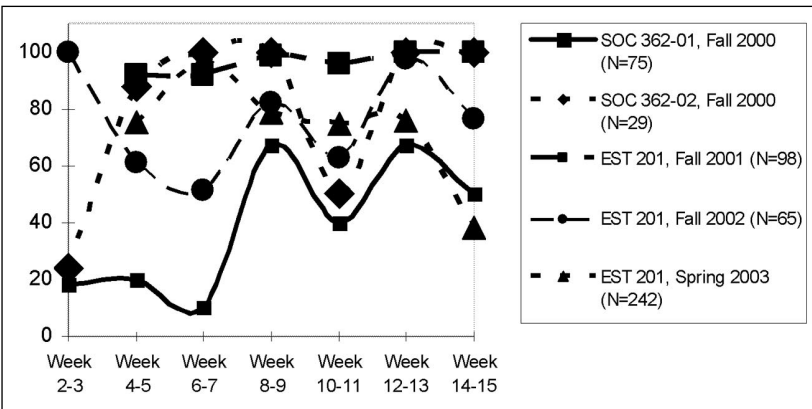


Figure 2. Student contributions related to course content

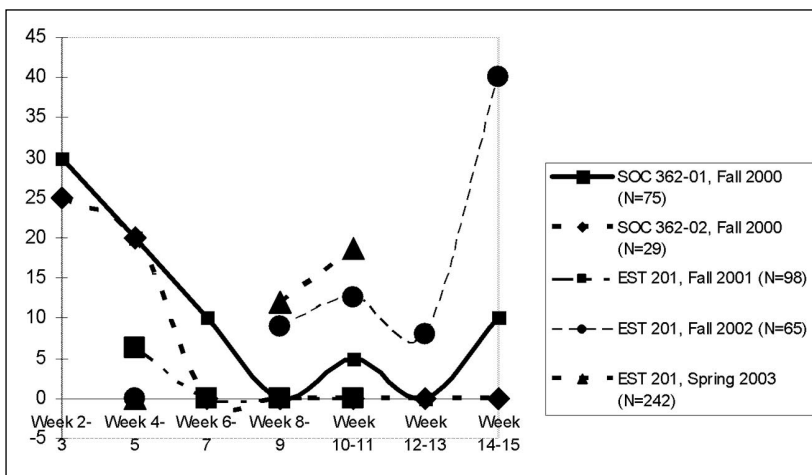


Figure 3. Percentage of professors' online contributions related to organization/technology/grading

Hypotheses 4-6 relate to how students learn the norms of the online environment and to chronological patterns of student and instructor online interaction. Hypotheses 4-6 in short form are: H4, initial student resistance to online activities is overcome; H5, as students learn patterns, postings become longer and deeper, but less frequent; and H6, there is a decrease in instructor postings on requirements and an increase in content postings.

Hypotheses 4-6 were all uniformly confirmed for the hybrid classes with relatively more online activities (see Table 3). The situation was less clear for the blended courses, which had fewer online activities. Among the blended courses, the EST 201 (Fall 2001) course with 40% online supported hypotheses 4-5 much more than did EST 201 (Fall 2002 and Spring 2003), with only 25 to 30% online. This suggests the possibility of a "threshold" effect depending on the percentage of online interaction (see later discussion).

The investigators expected that student's initial reluctance to online course activities would resolve over time as students made sense of the "routines." Therefore one could expect a decrease in instructor postings focusing on organizational issues and a relative increase in content-related postings. This was definitely confirmed for the hybrid classes, but not for the blended courses.

During the second and third weeks of the semester, students in the two sections of the hybrid course posted 41 chat room messages, most of which reflected uneasiness with the new hybrid format of the class:

"I'm really nervous about taking a test online, and in case other people are, too, I just wanted to wish everyone good luck."

Table 3
 Comparative Findings of Hybrid and Blended Classes for Hypotheses #4 to #6.
 Hypotheses that are confirmed are bold and are underlined

Hypotheses and Findings of Hybrid SOC 362 and Blended EST 201 Classes	SOC 362-01, Fall 2000	SOC 362-02, Fall 2000	EST 201 Fall 2001	EST 201, Fall 2002	EST 201, Spring 2003
Estimated percentage of online interaction	Hybrid 70%	Hybrid 70%	Blended 40%	Blended 30%	Blended 25%
N	75	29	98	65	242
H4: Initial resistance to online overcome.					
Number of non-class-content-related postings by students declines over time compared to content-related postings	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Increasing (at end)	Increasing at end)
Class-content-related postings by students increase over time compared to other postings, see FIGURE 2	Increasing (wave) CONFIRM	Increasing (wave) CONFIRM	Increasing CONFIRM	Wave	Declining (Bell-shape)
Ratio of postings by instructor/students declines over time as students learn norms: ratio of # of postings by professor to # of postings by students	Decreasing (Bell-shape) CONFIRM	Decreasing (Bell-shape) CONFIRM	Constant (U-shape)	Decreasing (W-shape)	Decreasing (Bell-shape)
Ratio of postings by instructor to postings by students declines over time as students learn norms: ratio of # of postings by professor to # of students who participated by posting	Decreasing (Bell-shape) CONFIRM	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Decreasing (U-shape) CONFIRM	W-shape	Decreasing (Bell-shape) CONFIRM
H5: As students learn patterns, postings become longer and deeper, but less frequent.					
Student postings decline over time: percent of students participating by posting relative to class size	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Increasing (wave)	Decreasing (Bell-shape) CONFIRM
Student postings decline over time: average number of postings per student	Decreasing CONFIRM	Decreasing CONFIRM	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Increasing	Increasing

Number of students who participated by posting declines over time	Constant- Decreasing CONFIRM	Decreasing CONFIRM	Decreasing CONFIRM	Increasing (M-shape)	Decreasing (Bell-shape) CONFIRM
Average number of paragraphs submitted online by students increases over time (1 paragraph=5 lines)	Increasing (Wave) CONFIRM	Increasing (Wave) CONFIRM	Decreasing (Bell-shape)	Increasing (Bell-shape) CONFIRM	Decreasing) (Bell-shape)
Number of postings by students declines over time	Decreasing CONFIRM	Decreasing CONFIRM	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Increasing (M-shape)	Decreasing (Bell-shape) CONFIRM
H6: Decrease in instructor postings on requirements, increase in content postings.					
Number of postings by instructor declines over time	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Decreasing CONFIRM	U-shape	Constant (Bell-shape)	Bell-shape
Average number of paragraphs submitted online by instructor decreases over time	Decreasing CONFIRM	Decreasing CONFIRM	Increasing	U-shape	Bell-shape
Number of online student to student postings declines over time	Decreasing CONFIRM	Decreasing (M-shape) CONFIRM	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Increasing (wave)	Decreasing (M=shape) CONFIRM
Instructor non-class-content-related postings decline over time compared to class-content-related, see FIGURE 3	Decreasing (wave) CONFIRM	Decreasing CONFIRM	Decreasing CONFIRM	Increasing (wave)	Increasing
Instructor class content-related postings increase over time compared to other postings, see FIGURE 1	Increasing CONFIRM	Increasing CONFIRM	Increasing (wave) CONFIRM	Increasing (Bell-shape) CONFIRM	Increasing (Bell-shape) CONFIRM

“I don't like it. I think I will just become lazy and do poorly.”

“I agree with this. Online classes are only going to make people lazy and I'm going to forget to go online.”

“Please tell me how you managed to take the test. I went into assignments and saw the test but can't click into it. Help Please!”

“I agree, I would rather be in class than staring at a computer screen.”

Later on in the semester, *chat room* postings decreased to only 8 in weeks 11 and 12. This decline of questions and comments about organization, technical, and grading issues suggests most students resolved their original uneasiness about online activities and started to conform to the new online norms.

On the other hand, the instructor teaching the blended courses had great trouble throughout the semester getting students to participate in online forums. Over four semesters, he tried to boost student participation in various ways. Despite the online activities counting for one third of the course grade, students never fully participated in these online discussions. Table 4 summarizes the results of the study.

DISCUSSION

The support for self-talk both in the hybrid courses (higher percentage online) and one of the blended courses (with 30% percentage online), but not the other two blended courses, is intriguing. This suggests that percentage of activities online influences self-talk. It also suggests that other factors, such as emergent differences in groups, differences in assignments, and course level differences in norms, influence self-talk. One might speculate

Table 4
Summary of Results

Hypotheses	Hybrid (more online)	Blended (less online)
H1: Students self-talk for postings.	Yes	No
H2: Online forums are student front-stage for grades.	Yes	Yes
H3: Students prepare for front-stage forums with drafts, observing.	No	No
H4: Initial resistance to online overcome.	Yes	No
H5: As students learn patterns, postings become longer, deeper.	Yes	No
H6: Decrease in instructor postings on requirements, increase in content postings.	Yes	No

that the harder the online assignments, the more unresolved student emotions are and hence more self-talk is needed to resolve them. This could be particularly true if grading emphasizes a greater precision with language. On the other hand, an emphasis on precision of language might stem from norms of the class and not explicit grading policy. The instructor of the blended course (30% online) with more evidence of self-talk did not explicitly grade on the use of language, but did try to promote a scholarly discourse in online discussions through modeling.

The current pilot study does provide some evidence for self-talk in online portions of hybrid courses. This makes perfect sense. If self-interaction and self-talk are important elements for social learning in humans, they are also important in learning in formal education and also important for blended and hybrid learning – even though communication is restrained to the written form in online interaction. Only the relative newness of blended and hybrid forms of e-learning seems to cloud the understanding that online interaction also falls under the “laws” of social learning commonly identified with FTF teaching.

In both hybrid and blended courses, there was strong support for front-stage, that is, that online discussions and assignments are front-stage for impression management.

The questionnaire data provided strong support for online portions of the class as front-stage for students. The investigators postulated specific mechanisms for back-stage: that students prepare for front-stage with drafts and observe what others post before they themselves post. Neither mechanism received much support. Subsequent studies, both qualitative and quantitative, might look for other specific front and back-stage mechanisms.

The current pilot study used content analysis of online postings to investigate hypotheses H4-H6, which relate to how students adjust to norms in online portions of hybrid and blended courses. These hypotheses, in shorthand, are: H4 - *Initial resistance to online setting is overcome*, H5 - *As students learn the online norms and social patterns, postings become longer and deeper*, and H6 - *As the semester progresses, there is a decrease in instructor postings on requirements and an increase in content-related postings*. All three of these hypotheses were supported for the two hybrid course sections (70% online), but less so for the two blended courses with 25 to 30% online. The findings for the blended course (40% online) were somewhere inbetween the previously mentioned hybrid and blended courses.

Student resistance to e-learning was easier overcome in the hybrid class with 70% graded online components, but less so in the blended courses with 25 to 30% online components. These results suggest a possible “threshold” effect, that is, online activities must represent a substantial portion of the course for students to readily accept them.

It is notable that the hypotheses relating to acclimatization to norms (H4:

Initial resistance to online overcome, H5: As students learn patterns, postings become longer, deeper, H6: Decrease in instructor postings on requirements, increase in content postings) were supported in the two hybrid course sections but less so in the blended courses. The authors speculate that there may be some *threshold* effect with online activities in hybrid and blended courses, that is, online activities need to constitute some minimum percentage for students to internalize the norms. If there is such a threshold, then instructors in courses with a small percentage of online activity may expect to be repeating the rules, redefining the norms over the full course of the semester. If instructors wish student online interaction to reach a high academic quality, conforming to some specific rules of discourse, then online activities should represent at least 50% of total course activities. Anything less and undergraduate students may gravitate back to their accustomed informal style of online communication. Naturally these points are somewhat tentative, pending further investigation.

CONCLUSION

In group situations, people develop a sense of membership (“us versus them”) by signs and statements, which have meaning only to those within the group (Garfinkel, 1967). These signs can be, for example, a secret handshake, cryptic phrases referencing shared events, or particular ways of dressing such as ripping holes in one’s jeans. As a person tries to be accepted into the group, s/he makes tentative attempts to understand and correctly interact using these signs, gauging progress of acceptance by feedback from group members. Students interpret a traditional classroom experience as “orderly” when the professor is teaching in front of the class and writing notes on the blackboard as s/he speaks. How the instructor says certain sentences emphasizes for his audience how s/he feels about a given subject. Unspoken meanings are transmitted not only by verbal, but also by nonverbal cues which are not part of e-learning interaction. Students of online classes have to decipher written instructions, announcements, examples, or assignments to understand what is expected of them and what is of importance. Online instructors remark that the instructions they give students need to be highly detailed and even redundant, since there is less immediate question and answer and less nonverbal communication to disambiguate instructions (Smith et al., 2002).

It is not clear whether the more constrained nonphysical and indirect (“virtual”) communication prevents students from a better understanding of requirements and learning in comparison with FTF classes. Parks (1996) suggested that there is no “missing meaning” in online interaction. Internet language also has group-adopted “signs” functionally identical with the common group jargon of FTF interactions used to solidify group membership (Parks). Internet communities also learn the unspoken norms of their

community. Online students learn what language is appropriate to use for what purpose and at what time.

However, with fewer channels of communication and the slower turn-around time in asynchronous online environments, the establishment of norms may take longer. This may also be true for online components in hybrid courses. Although in hybrid classes, the instructor can resolve some of the online ambiguities FTF.

Some think the written language used in e-mails, forums, instant messaging, or chat rooms can be more effective in creating community than the fleeting spoken word in FTF interactions (Putnam & Pacanowsky, 1999, pp. 99-122). However, in online classes, the instructor has to construct an effective framework to transmit knowledge and symbolic meaning, and to establish group norms, group codes, and bonds in virtual reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the written format, people can communicate feelings and “virtual” gestures through slang and with letters, digits, and graphical symbols, such as “shouting” by way of capital letters, exclamation or question marks, periods, “happy face” symbols, and so forth (James & Erin, 1997). However, online educators are expected to be more formal and they expect their students to be more formal. They bond with students through the character, length, frequency, and type of responses.

There are plenty of opportunities to “make sense” of and internalize the norms of the online learning format. The key factor for establishing and maintaining online relationships and learning efficacy is the quality and quantity of interaction. According to our investigation and experience and the research of others, the amount of time and the degree of involvement participants invest in virtual interaction (Parks, 1996) is vital for learning and student satisfaction. It is crucial how much and how quickly an instructor responds (Shea et al., 2001) to overcome the lack of real-time interaction.

Immediacy revisited: It is worth revisiting the construct of immediacy to discuss it in relation to the internalization of norms. As mentioned earlier, “immediacy” refers to behavior that reduces perceived psychological distance between instructor and student and between students. Immediacy behaviors can be classified as affective (emotion-oriented), cohesive (community building) and interactive (responding to other students’ content-related communications). As mentioned earlier, in one study the students of a graduate class showed a high frequency of cohesive responses early on in the semester, giving way later to more interactive responses (Swan et al., 2001). A similar phenomenon was noted in the hybrid course in the current study, where over time there was a decrease in instructor postings focusing on organizational issues and a relative increase in content-related postings. Cast in the constructs of microsociology, initially students were learning the norms of the new environment. Once norms were internalized, students dis-

cussed more efficiently the course content with each other and began to make visible progress in their learning. By casting immediacy in the micro-sociological constructs of norms and front-stage, and so forth., we theorize a sequence of immediacy behaviors. Affective immediacy behaviors occur at the start of the course as students resist a relatively less familiar online environment. Once they start to accept the environment a little, cohesive immediacy behaviors occur as students learn norms and form a community. Interactive immediacy behaviors occur later, once norms are established, as students communicate with each other at a content level, creating a front-stage impression for the instructor. Thus the sequence of immediacy behaviors is: (a) affective, (b) cohesive, and then (c) interactive. Moore's taxonomy (Moore, 1993) of online interaction can also be cast in the micro-sociology constructs of this article, producing a sequence of interactions: (a) learner-instructor, (b) learner-learner, and (c) learner-content.

This pilot study, although limited in scope, has some implications for the design and teaching of hybrid (higher percentage online) and blended (less online activities) courses. In all courses (both hybrid and blended), data strongly supported online activities as front-stage for impression management. This is good news for researchers who talk about "online communities," (Preece, 1999; Swan et al., 2001). Considering that online communication has a "democratization effect," students feel freer to discuss, all students can and should participate, shyness, looks and second language are less of an impediment to discussion (Smith et al., 2002), instructors should increasingly use online activities as a way for students to present an academic and professional front. This is particularly true since college students' writing skills often need development.

From a theoretical level, the positive results from this study suggest that micro-sociology constructs are a useful way to understand online interaction, immediacy, and community in hybrid and blended courses and to make sense of interaction research on fully online e-learning. For example, immediacy and online community research results make more sense viewed through the lens of internalization of norms. As mentioned earlier, micro-sociology constructs provide a theoretical sequence to immediacy behaviors in online community interactions: (a) affective, (b) cohesive, and finally (c) interactive. This progression assumes that online interaction in the course reaches a certain threshold; otherwise, students may not exert the effort needed to learn the norms of the online environment.

Future research directions might be to better articulate some of the research instruments and apply them to more courses. It would be particularly useful to apply these research instruments based on micro-sociology constructs to a variety of courses with different percentages of online activities.

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Appendix A

Full version of the questionnaire

Please Indicate:

1. Age: _____

2. Gender: _____

3. Major: _____

4. Do you reside on or off campus? _____
5. Are you employed? _____
6. If yes, how many hours per week do you work? _____
7. How many classes are you taking this semester?_ _____

Following each statement, please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree based on the following point scale.

Disagree(1) Somewhat Disagree(2) Don't Know(3) Somewhat Agree(4) Agree(5)

1. Grades are important to me: _____
2. I am an honors student: _____
3. I don't really care about grades: _____
4. It takes me a long time to finish assignments: _____
5. My friends do well in school: _____
6. Sometimes I find myself writing and re-writing the same forum and/or chat posting: _____
7. I want others in my class/on-line to perceive me as intelligent: _____
8. I believe that I am very intelligent: _____
9. My friends are more interested in having fun than in getting good grades: _____
10. I dress for success: _____
11. Before going to class, I check my appearance in the mirror: _____
12. When reacting to statements on-line, I tend to agree with the professor: _____
13. If the professor pursues his point in the forum, I usually change my position: _____
14. Before submitting my forum responses, I usually seek the opinions of others: _____
15. I feel that I play many different roles (i.e., athlete, student, sibling, friend): _____
16. I wait for others to post remarks in the forum so I can get ideas before posting my own: _____
17. I try to imagine what the professor would like to hear before posting my remarks: _____
18. I value my professors opinion: _____
19. I try to impress the professor with my ideas: _____
20. Getting an A grade in this class is not important to me: _____

Thank you for completing this survey. If you would like the results of this survey, please type your e-mail address here: _____