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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore the online instructor’s role in building epistemic trusting relationships with adult learners in their online classrooms. A mixed-method phenomenology research (MMPR) approach was used to discover if certain instructor actions influenced an epistemic trust relationship to develop between the instructor and the adult learner. This study examined the instructor’s classroom management actions, communication immediacy actions, and regulatory actions, as well as the level of epistemic trust in 48 fully online courses, focusing on 4 exemplar cases for cross-case analysis. It was determined that the instructor’s classroom management actions and communication immediacy actions explained 52% of the variation in epistemic trust. The instructor’s regularity actions played a lesser role by initializing early trust (a shallower trust than epistemic trust), a necessary foundation on which to build epistemic trust relationships. The regulatory actions also provided support for the other two types of instructor actions by creating a sense of the instructor’s fairness and availability. The study advanced a causation network that made visible a path from early trust of the instructor to an epistemic trust relationship with the instructor. These results suggest that instructors that practice these three types of actions in the online classroom have the potential to influence epistemic trust relationships with the adult learners, thereby improving learner motivation, cooperation, critical thinking, satisfaction, and academic performance. The findings presented in this study provide a possible epistemic trust model that may contribute to future research for developing a theory of epistemic trust.
Research Questions

- How and to what extent, do certain actions by the online classroom instructor influence an epistemic trust relationship with the adult learner?

- **How do normative actions of the instructor** influence the epistemic trust relationship with the adult learner?

- **How do communication immediacy actions of the instructor** influence the adult learner to epistemically trust that instructor?

- **How does the instructor’s frequent and consistent presence in the online classroom** influence the epistemic trust relationship with the adult learner?
Instructor Actions

Research Question #2: Normative actions

NA1: Guide conduct of members (Clarifies rules (policies) and reasons for rules, Discusses acceptable conduct, Controls actions of class members, Monitors compliance of class members)
NA2: Manage quality of work and deadlines (Sets performance goals, discusses milestones)
NA3: Prompt individuals who struggle with deadlines/quality of work
NA4: Guide analytical thinking to truth/knowledge
NA5: Guides away from misinformation

Sources: (Abrams, Cross, Lesser, & Levin, 2003; Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013)

Research Question #3: Immediacy Actions

IA1: Connects with personal experiences
IA2: Invites private messaging
IA4: Fosters professional relationship/mentors
IA5: Encourages and praises to promote participation
IA7: Shows care and concern for individuals (verbally caring messages)
IA8: Shares responsibility for individual student success (helpful)

Sources: (Abrams et al., 2003; Arbaugh, 2001; Coppola, Hilz, & Rotter, 2004; Gorham, 1988; Landrum, Eaves, & Shafto, 2015; Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2002; Teven & Hanson, 2004)

Research Question #4: Regulatory Actions

RA1: Highly interactive early in course
RA2: Early enthusiastic early on
RA3: Consistent in word and deed
RA4: Transparent regularity
RA5: Responsive to messages

Source: (Abrams et al., 2003; McAllister, 1997)

Inconclusive:
IA3: Uses textual gestures (emojis)
IA6: Uses inclusive pronouns (first names, ‘we statements’)
Figure 5.6. Cross-case causal network for three types of instructor actions and an epistemic trust relationship