Building community in online discussion: A case study of moderator strategies

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ABSTRACT

Asynchronous online discussions, commonly used in higher education contexts, are predicated on the collaborative construction of knowledge in a supportive community of learners. Despite early positive evaluations, researchers have more recently identified amongst students a failure to learn and dissatisfaction with participation in these environments. To better understand and address these failures, this study explores the linguistic enactment of community in online interaction, specifically moderator strategies, using a discourse analytical approach informed by systemic functional linguistics. The analysis identifies a range of strategies which confirm, bring into question and go beyond those commonly described in the literature. Significantly, much attitudinal meaning is invoked (implicit) rather than inscribed (explicit), interpersonal grammatical metaphor is widely used and ENGAGEMENT: expand is common, opening the discussion to other views and voices. This raises issues of clarity and certainty, suggesting there may be an inherent contradiction between community maintenance and the development of ideational meaning.

Introduction

The accelerating uptake of online delivery modes in higher education has brought with it an increase in the use of asynchronous discussions. Common rationales for their use comprise both practical and pedagogical elements. On a practical level, they are said to offer flexibility of time and place for distance as well as on-campus students (and academics). On the other hand, it is suggested that they also provide pedagogically valued opportunities for debate and reflection (e.g. Benfield, 2002), avoid transmission modes of teaching and enact social constructivist (Nichols, 2009), 'group-centred' rather than 'authority-centred' (Garrison, 2006: 25) modes of learning.

Asynchronous online discussions represent a many-to-many mode in which posts are visible to all participants (who are named) and persist as long as the course is 'live'. While individual postings to the discussion are single-authored, the discussion as a whole is multilogic and collaboratively constructed. The discussion may be experienced as a 'lean' medium (e.g. Spitzberg, 2006: 635), lacking most non-text semiotic cues such as intonation, facial expression and gesture. Postings to such discussions are commonly described as hybrid texts showing features of both written and spoken language (e.g. Yates, 1996).

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Pedagogical rationales for this mode of learning typically make reference to the *collaborative construction* of meaning within an online *community* (e.g. De Laat & Lally, 2004; Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell & Haag 1995; Littleton & Whitelock, 2005), with both cognitive and affective factors playing a role (Garrison, 2006). Generalised, utopian views of the possibilities of online discussion are exemplified by Harasim (e.g. 2000) who claims that 'computer conferencing . . . remains the "heart and soul" of online education' (p. 51). Its attributes and affordances are said to include socio-affective benefits, messaging which encourages 'verbalisation and articulation of ideas' and 'reduced socio-physical discrimination' (p. 50). However, such early positive assessments came to be tempered as online learning spread to a wider range of disciplines and students. Students were found not to be reaching the higher levels of knowledge construction suggested by the pedagogy (e.g. Moore & Marra, 2005), even showing strong negative reactions to participation (e.g. Ellis, Goodyear, Prosser, & O'Hara, 2006; Hara & Kling, 2002) or simply a failure to engage.

This paper focuses on the nature of, and role played by, the enactment of community (rather than the construction of meaning) in online discussions. Using a discourse analytical approach, it seeks to answer the questions: How have online communities been theorised and described to date? What purpose are they said to serve? How can they be characterised from a discourse analytical point of view? How are they constructed and maintained and by whom? The paper reports on selected findings from a larger study which seeks to account for some of the adverse findings described above.

Online learning communities: theory and practice

Online learning communities are commonly described as (potentially at least) offering social and/or emotional support (e.g. Goodyear, 2002) as well as facilitating learning through collaboration and cooperation. Brook and Oliver (2003) suggest that this is 'well-supported by theories of learning that highlight the role of social interaction in the construction of knowledge' (p. 139) but admit that a 'definitive definition of the term remains elusive' (p. 130). The two main models proposed for pedagogical communities are the *Community of Practice* (not to be further discussed here) and (online) the *Community of Inquiry*.

The Community of Inquiry (COI) concept, formulated by Garrison and colleagues (2006), has been very influential in the online discussion debate. The concept is used to describe online learning communities, provide guidance to practitioners and frame research. In fact, the Community of Inquiry and its associated analytical instruments are described as the most common 'research tool' for 'measuring cognitive outcomes in asynchronous discourse' (Nichols, 2009: 20; also Rourke & Kanuka, 2009).

Garrison describes the goal of creating a 'community of inquiry where students are fully engaged in collaboratively constructing meaningful and worthwhile knowledge' through reflection and discourse (2006: 25). He suggests that the COI comprises the three interrelated core elements of *social presence, cognitive presence* and *teaching presence* (p. 26) which lead to success in achieving 'deep and meaningful learning'. Social presence is described as comprising *affective, cohesive* and *interactive* responses. This paper will concentrate on tracing social presence and its role in fostering community in the case study discussions.

Describing social presence

Although the concept of social presence is intuitively appealing, in reality it has proved difficult to define it and empirical evidence for its existence is far from robust (Doherty, 2006). Social presence appears to have no generally accepted definition (Russo & Campbell, 2004: 230; Tu & McIsaac, 2002: 132), although in published studies of this phenomenon there is a constellation of imprecise descriptions (Irwin & Berge, 2006: 3). These include the 'ability . . . to participate personally and authentically . . . to be perceived as salient and 'real' by others (Nichols, 2009: 20), the 'illusion of non-mediation' (Picciano, 2002: 24) and a feeling of trust (e.g. Tu & McIsaac, 2002: 142). Contrasting with descriptions of online discussions as a 'lean' medium (Spitzberg, 2006), other commentators describe this medium's 'hyperpersonalness' (Swan & Shih, 2005: 116; also O'Sullivan, Hunt & Lippert, 2004), meaning the ability of participants to project their personalities using text alone. It is claimed that social presence resides both with 'teachers' (moderators, facilitators) and students. Research into the connection between social presence, interaction and learning has produced positive findings (summarised in O'Sullivan et al., 2004). In much the same way that the 'community construct' is widely accepted as a *sense* rather than a tangible entity (Brook & Oliver, 2003: 31), findings here include a strong correlation between *perceived* social presence, interaction and *perceived* performance (Swan & Shih, 2005: 117 also Picciano, 2002: 30). Also reported as significant are positive impacts of 'immediacy' on affect, short-term recall and cognitive learning (Reio & Crim, 2006; Tu & McIsaac, 2002) and a significant impact on participant satisfaction with courses (Reio & Crim, 2006; Russo & Campbell, 2004; Swan & Shih, 2005: 116–117). However, links between social presence and learning (objectively measured) have not been adequately researched (cf Jolivette, 2006: 537). In fact, *empirical* research into social presence is limited; many studies are small-scale and rely largely on self-reporting (Reio & Crim, 2006), suggesting that findings need to be treated with caution.

Characteristics of social presence

In tandem with their formulation of the COI construct, Anderson and colleagues developed research instruments to identify online communities and the 'presences' within them. These include descriptors of moderator behaviour and language,