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Movers and shapers: Teaching in online environments

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports a study-in-progress examining interactions in the asynchronous discussions of a post-graduate TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) distance subject, focusing on the impact of scaffolding collaborative knowledge construction. Two complementary theories were used: sociocultural theory, which views interaction as essential to the knowledge building process, in particular dialogically between expert–novice, and students as equals; and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) which highlights language as a meaning-making resource deployed in social interactions and allows insight into the unfolding construal of knowledge and the interpersonal relationships being enacted. The results confirmed the significant role of the instructor in shaping dialogic opportunities that move learners towards new understandings. Close attention to the unfolding language choices of the participants provides a logogenesis of the online discussion texts, offers fresh insights into the nature of adult learning, and into the complex relationships between the intersubjective and experiential in online learning environments.

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Introduction: online discussions: to co-construct knowledge?

The provision of communication technologies in e-learning packages should not be assumed will equate to productive use of discussion in the learning process. In other words, simply making technologies accessible is no guarantee of effective learning outcomes and problematises the extent to which discussion is facilitated for online pedagogic purposes (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007). Although programs using a constructivist perspective seem to be better equipped for building a learning community (Liu et al., 2007), many instructors are not aware of the different pedagogical requirements for online teaching and learning. It may be that online instructors need to be *more* available to monitor discussions and answer questions, resolve misunderstandings, guide discussion consistently towards learning aims, as well as organise and facilitate a variety of ways to interact, such as real-time chat, asynchronous forums or blogs. This is in addition to ensuring individual and timely feedback crucial to online students (Bailey & Card, 2009; Koh & Hill, 2009) as well as modelling the skills and values of the particular learning community (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Modelling communicative skills also must involve taking into account the lack of usual face-to-face meaning-making cues, such as gesture, facial expression, voice variation, interactive immediacy for clarification and so on. Indeed, nurturing a positive and inclusive learning environment requires both communicative skills and interpersonal awareness to mitigate any potential for misunderstanding that may occur in the absence of usual meaning-making cues.

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In our literature review (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014) we found that readiness to embrace online education may be strong at the bureaucratic level, however this is not necessarily shared by those at the face of implementation. Adequate institutional support and preparation in times of shifting delivery modes are often felt by faculty staff to be lacking, affecting attitudes towards the change in practice that online pedagogy requires, particularly around the use of discussion, with the issue of risk-aversion towards implementing new technologies or new applications being a factor for consideration (Howard, 2013). Due to staff also often managing multiple roles or being employed on a part-time or casual basis, the use of discussion in online classes may present as an additional organisational and pedagogical bugbear. A contributing factor may be the uncertainties of what to do with tutorial-like discussion which, unlike the transience of verbal discussion, remains permanent as graphic representations. The pull towards some form of assessment (and flow-on to workload) may be understood as meaning being no longer fleeting, but rendered as an object (Martin, 1992, p. 513), and hence discussions are able to be revisited at a later stage and evaluated. These issues allude to some of the challenges faced when adapting to a different pedagogic approach and the shift in mindset required, involving not just challenges on mental energies but also demands on available time.

On the other hand, we found that where the value of discussion for online groups is embedded into pedagogic practice, there is much debate around compulsory or voluntary use of discussion. Numerous decisions need to be made around how to incorporate discussion into the natural flow of the online class with consideration of the purpose of discussion, its integration into learning aims and activities, the dynamics and size of the group, the likelihood of diversity in languages, cultural values, time zones, as well as the role of the educator in managing, sustaining and supporting students through discussion, to name a few. Another salient point is that when interaction rests solely in one's 'performances' in the asynchronous communications, meanings then are totally committed to this modality, rather than distributed over a number of different forms of communicating. This is perhaps a paradox of online discussion, in that there is potential both to create knowledge, and misunderstanding.

Background and motivation for the study

In light of the above issues we were interested in the impact on online discussion when the instructor took an active role as mediator. This paper reports the findings from one of three online TESOL postgraduate subjects as part of an ongoing study. Each of the instructors chose varying degrees of involvement in the discussion forums – one was actively present, another was minimally involved but observing, and the third did not 'go there'. During interviews the instructors indicated that they had continuing, and unresolved, concerns around the most effective use of discussion forums. Some were in regard to fostering discussion, particularly if students resisted, as one instructor pointed out, "... let's not use the word 'interact' for a minute – students who *post* comments on the forums, but *don't* interact with others". Another issue was a tendency for students to withdraw from the forums when the instructor became involved – "it causes a lot of students to just not join in at all when they think the tutor's there watching, looking". One instructor found student forum activity was moderately useful as "a definitive or hairsplitting" exercise, especially as a 'reward' for active students hovering between grades. Whether to assess discussion also raised the issue of simply counting the number of postings (less time consuming), versus consideration of the content. As one instructor commented this often took an inordinate amount of time because "some [students] would put reams on there ... not waffle, but ...". She lamented, "How [to assess]? ... *how many? how much? the quality?*".

The above concerns were instrumental in two of the instructors opting out of active involvement in the discussions, with one of these opting out altogether. For the purposes of this paper, the focus is on the third subject (hereafter referred to as 'Case I'). Case I instructor was actively guiding the discussion forums, which had a token assessment weighting of 5% given for participation. Looking across the different kinds of discussion that evolved from the three cases, the role of the online instructor, as mediator, was the point of departure for Case I in terms of the productiveness of discussions, as well as the quality of the online experience (gleaned from student interviews and a survey).

The challenges and responsibilities for the online instructor are extensive. A significant challenge is to create as many opportunities for dialogue as possible (as occurs in face-to-face tutorials). To optimise student involvement asynchronous discussion needs to be guided in a way that leads to new collective understandings (of content, self and others). Another responsibility is to foster a social climate in which trust and cooperation develop good collaborative relations, which also contributes to effective use of discussion for learning. Indeed, meaningful engagement with learning content is important for boosting student confidence which is inspired also by teacher modelling, especially if great enthusiasm is displayed for their subject (Delahunty et al., 2014).

In education it is generally held that co-construction of knowledge is a necessary component of contemporary pedagogic practice (Gibbons, 2006; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 2006), therefore the online discussion forums become the focal point for how this is enacted, as these represent the main opportunity for learning as social activity. Being involved in discussions also reinstates some visibility rendered by the mode of delivery (i.e. the lack of physical presence). Hence, discussions become important opportunities for negotiating identities, crucial for adult learners (Delahunty et al., 2014; Knowles, 1980; Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012). In other words, online participants become visible as they reveal something of who they are through what they write (Ivanič, 1998). Language use therefore, or making meaning through the interactions that occurred, provide insight into how new understandings can be both dialogically supported and co-constructed.

As the discussions generated in Case I were qualitatively different to those of the other two cases, the aim of this study was to examine what supported co-construction of knowledge in online discussions between the instructor, and the postgraduate

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