Full length article

Developing a culture of commenting in a first-year seminar

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ABSTRACT

In the context of diversifying college enrollment and rapidly evolving technologies this study explored how an interactive blogging community developed within a first-year seminar for low-income students ($N = 66$) at a four-year public urban college. In collaboration with administrators and faculty, the researcher integrated a blogging activity into the first-year seminar. Four times during their first six months of college, students posted narratives reflecting on their transition experiences and were also encouraged to read and comment on peers' blog posts. The current study examined why some posts received more peer comments than others and how these trends changed over time. Using narrative analysis, the researcher measured the rates of specific evaluative devices in students' posts. Multiple linear regression was then used to determine that psychological state evaluative devices per post predicted a small amount of the commenting variance at the beginning of the study. By the end of the study intensifying and psychological state evaluative devices per post predicted over 50% of the commenting variance. These findings illustrate how over time first-year students used the interactive writing platform to make sense of their college transition and develop a culture of commenting.

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1. Theory and prior research

1.1. Sense-making and writing

While ethnic diversity in the contemporary college continues to increase (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013), college completion rates for first generation and low-income students are rising more slowly (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). In fact, despite record enrollment rates in American colleges only 11% of low-income and first-generation students earned a Bachelor's degree within six years, compared to 54% of the general population (Wine, Janson, & Wheeless, 2011). The current report on students' development of a culture of commenting is part of a larger ongoing intervention that was designed to support first generation and low-income students as they transitioned to college. In collaboration with administrators and faculty in an educational opportunity program at a four-year urban public college, the researcher embedded an interactive blogging activity within the first-year curriculum. The writing activity was informed by theoretical and empirical insights from the fields of psychology (Daiute & Nelson, 1997; Lucic, 2013) and literacy studies (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 60–102; Emig, 1977; Fulwiler, 1983), while the design of the interactive network drew from recent literature on the relationship between social media use and college adjustment (Ranney & Troop-Gordon, 2012; Yang & Brown, 2015, 2016).

Writing requires high levels of cognitive and emotional effort and it is in this process of sorting out how best to explain a set of thoughts or emotions to a specific audience that sense-making occurs (Berthoff & Stephens, 1988; Daiute & Nelson, 1997; Emig, 1977; Fulwiler, 1983; Lucic, 2013). Writing is a developmental practice in which a narrator must transform amorphous thoughts and emotions into representative words (Daiute, 2014, pp. 150–189; Polkinghorne, 1988; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014; Wertsch, 1991), and it is through writing that a narrator makes sense of cognitive and emotional challenges that may have previously appeared overwhelming. The sense-making occurs during the activity of figuring out how to manifest thoughts and emotions in physical space, and to a given audience. Given this theoretical understanding, writing as a tool for sense-making can be especially useful for people who face challenging transitions, like first-year college students, who may question *do I belong* or *am I going to succeed?* The current study is concerned with the ways that low-income first-year students used expressive writing on a blog to make sense of their college transition, and how peers connected with this writing using comments.

One way that researchers can interpret how a narrator is using

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writing for sense-making is to focus on a narrator's evaluative language (Labov & Waletzky, 1967/1997). Evaluative devices are words that narrators use to express feelings, thoughts, and emphasis. A significance analysis, detailed in the methods section of this paper, is one type of narrative analysis that researchers have used to measure the ways narrators use evaluative devices for sense-making (Daiute & Griffin, 1993; Daiute, 2010, pp. 77–112; Lucic, 2013). The analysis focuses on the way a story is told and sheds light on how narrators enacted thoughts and emotions in relation to a particular audience.

1.2. Proliferation of interactive tools and the importance of audience

The explosion of social media (Nielsen, 2012), in part fueled by technical advancements that have made these interactive writing media more user friendly, has spurred researchers to explore the expanded possibilities for and implications of narrator-audience interaction (Baker & Moore, 2008; Fishman, Lunsford, McGregor, & Otuteye, 2005; Manago, Tamara, & Greenfield, 2012). Theorists and practitioners agree that writing is a social process (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 60–102; Bazerman, 2004; Ede, 1989; McLane, 1992; Ong, 1975). Explicitly or implicitly, writing is always directed from the writer to an imagined reader or readers. Bakhtin named this phenomena addressivity (Bakhtin, 1986, pp. 60–102), and began to detail how people address different others in different ways.

The shift in recent years to massive use of digital and explicitly social writing has further increased the importance of audience (Baker & Moore, 2008; Fishman et al., 2005; Lammers, Magnifico, & Curwood, 2014; Magnifico, 2010; Manago et al., 2012). While each interactive writing medium has distinct features, there are two main functions common to nearly all such media that account for the increase in importance of audience. First, interactive writing media can be tailored to broad or specific audiences. In the case of the current study, for reasons to be explained shortly, it was possible to limit the interactive network to include only specific users. Second, and perhaps even more importantly, the nearly universal comment function provides audiences with a tool for interacting with the narrator. This tool allows users to make connections and develop relationships within an interactive community. While these functions are not new, what makes the current context ripe for exploration is the increased ease of use, mobility, and ubiquitous quality of interactive writing tools today. The broad availability and use of these interactive media have major ramifications for the way that narrators express their thoughts and feelings, and ultimately use writing to make sense of a particular context or challenge. Educators familiar with these features can utilize them to best serve specific institutional and student needs. Students' enthusiasm for social writing, and the relative ease of use of the interactive media, make the current moment ideal for educators to integrate interactive writing media into curricula.

Blogs, one type of interactive media that has proliferated in recent years increasing in number from approximately 35 million sites in 2006 to 181 million in 2012 (Nielsen, 2012), are well suited for writing in educational contexts. While early blogs required users to be proficient coders, in recent years, programs such as Blogger and Wordpress have made blogging more accessible by providing easy-to-use platforms so that coding is no longer a prerequisite. Often, but not exclusively, blogs are written from one author's or group of authors' perspective. While blogs take a number of forms, they most often consist of personal opinion pieces organized as dated entries, called *posts*, which are presented in reverse chronological order (Bukvova, 2011; Powell, Jacob, & Chapman, 2012). Posts are generally text-based and often include images and hyperlinks to other websites and blogs. Once an author *publishes* a post, readers are then able to view and write comments on the post.

Blogs, and specifically WordPress blogs, differ from platforms like Facebook and Twitter in three main ways: First, blogs generally place more emphasis on longer written texts, with a typical post being more than 500 words, as opposed to Twitter where writers are limited to 140 characters. Though Facebook does not have the same limitations, the average post is around 122 words (Cvijikj & Michahelles, 2012). Second, the opportunities for interaction are more limited and structured on a blog where the main tool of interaction is the comment function. Third, unlike Facebook and Twitter, WordPress is a free and open source software. This means that researchers and practitioners can determine and modify the specifications of their blog networks as needed and without incurring any additional costs. For example, in the current study the researcher was able to create a standalone network. This gave the researcher complete control of the characteristics of the blog, including the registered users, the privacy settings, and any sensitive information that these users chose to share. The emphasis on writing, the limited and yet important ability to interact with peers and the affordances of using open source software make blogs an ideal platform for researchers and practitioners.

1.3. Cultural development and interactivity of blogs

Cultural practices, defined as a routine way of doing things within a particular community (Cole, 2005; Cole, Gay, Glick, & Sharp, 1971; Rogoff, 1990, 2003; Sternberg, 2004), develop over time within the context of social environments (Daiute, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). Through the study of language and activities, researchers can document how different communities engage in different cultural practices. Recent theory and research suggest that digital spaces provide new opportunities for the development of communication practices (Daiute, 2013; Glick, 2014; Manago, Guam & Greenfield, 2015). Specifically, blogs provide an environment where individuals can use writing to explore social possibilities and create dynamic relationships in a digital space (Benkler, 2006). These relationships are formed as narrators write about meaningful topics and their audience employs comments to interact with the narrator. Blogs are often used as a space for narrators to express their thoughts and values about particular topics (Gee, 2007). For example, Sosnowy (2013) showed how bloggers wrote about their experience with multiple sclerosis, Greene (2013) focused on bloggers who wrote about teaching in the New York City public schools, and Ducate and Lomicka (2008) described the ways students' blogged about shared values in a college language class. Bloggers can use these digital spaces as social exchanges to support each other through comments on specific topics of value.

Blogs provide a forum for writers and commenters who share a particular interest to communicate across time and geographical space. Some posts and subsequent comments may appear synchronous, almost like an instant message communication, while other posts and subsequent comments occur asynchronously (Bolander, 2012). When a reader writes a comment on a blog post, the comment generally appears below the original post with the reader's name or selected pseudonym. Through commenting, a reader quite literally connects with a post. These interactive capabilities shift the traditional dynamics of narrator-audience relations and magnify the importance of audience in the blogging medium as compared to more traditional writing formats like word processing.

The potential for narrator-audience interaction through comments allows for the formation of connections between bloggers and their audience. These connections function as implicit and