Linguistics and Education 46 (2018) 12–22

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Linguistics and Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/linged

Connecting to learn, learning to connect: Thinking together in asynchronous forum discussion

Janine Delahunty

Academic Development & Recognition, Learning, Teaching & Curriculum, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 12 October 2017
Received in revised form 8 May 2018
Accepted 8 May 2018

Keywords:
Asynchronous discussion
Co-constructing knowledge
Effective online discussion
Systemic functional linguistics
Talk types
Higher education

ABSTRACT

This article combines a sociocultural model of classroom talk with a linguistically-oriented model (systemic functional linguistics) to explore what characterizes effective asynchronous online discussion in higher education (HE). While the benefits of discussion are commonly accepted in face-to-face learning, engaging students in effective asynchronous discussion can often be 'hit or miss', due in part to the shift to interacting asynchronously. This hybrid mode of spoken-like/written-like communication demands skills which are rarely made explicit, often with the assumption that students (and lecturers) are proficient. The combined framework presented here enabled macro- and micro-understandings of discussion forums through an array of resources in the SFL model and the talk type descriptors to map linguistic features of knowledge constructing talk in an Australian postgraduate HE context. The notion of 'listening' (or attending to others) is proposed as a crucial condition for whether discussion progresses beyond simply 'posting'. Consequently, this article provides much needed insight into the murky space of asynchronous discussion forums.

1. Introduction

The exponential growth of online learning options has been a boon to higher education (HE) where flexibility and convenience has enabled wider participation for increasingly diverse students than would be possible with face-to-face delivery alone. However, the rapidity of uptake of technology-enhanced learning in HE has raised concerns about the ease with which students can 'connect to learn' while equivalent shifts in pedagogical practices may still be lagging (Goertzen & Kristjansson, 2007; Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2004; Salmon & Angood, 2013). While the 'anywhere, anytime' mode of delivery can attract interest from prospective students, this may have implications for the sociality of 'learning to connect', or the opportunities to develop a sense of belonging to a learning community through quality in relationships between group members who may never (physically) meet. How individuals perceive these relationships and their social positioning therein can influence their level of commitment to the community, resulting in either connecting or isolating effects (Delahunty, Jones, & Verenikina, 2014). The opportunities for building relations arise through effective and knowledge constructing interactions, in which negotiation of identities (i.e. who we are and what we do) and forming social alignments are seen as part of the learning process. This also highlights a paradox of 'flexibility' – that it provides just as many opportunities *not* to engage with others as it does to engage (Hughes, 2007).

Learning online occurs in a space where the potential for interactivity is disrupted by the mode of delivery (Wegerif, 2013). Terms such as 'read-only participants' or 'lurkers' tend to put the onus for engaging onto students, which raises questions of what is appropriate for online learning (Salmon, 2005) and, of particular interest for this article, the role of interaction for engaging learners from a range of different backgrounds who choose to study online. In terms of learning as a transformative social practice however, 'lurking' type behaviour problematizes the quality of the collective learning experience and can have a 'profound effect on both collective thinking and individual thinking' (Mercer & Howe, 2012, p. 13).

Developing learning communities in online contexts relies on interaction, and a lack of interaction can hamper the forming of social relationships. Interaction has been demonstrated to have multiple benefits for the online learner: it is important for reducing feelings of isolation that arise from being physically and geographically separated (Rovai & Downey, 2010, p. 145); it promotes an atmosphere of inquiry and application of new understandings (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Garrison, 2007); it provides opportunities for negotiating identities (Delahunty, 2012; Hughes, 2007; Ivanič, 1998; Kwon, Han, Bang, & Armstrong, 2010) and for negotiating stances (Delahunty et al., 2014). Interaction in online learning contexts can

E-mail address: janined@uow.edu.au

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2018.05.003
0898-5898/

also influence student motivation (Vonderwell & Zachariah, 2005), confidence (Herrera, Mendoza, & Maldonado, 2009), satisfaction levels (Palmer & Holt, 2012), and the rate of attrition (Stone, O'Shea, May, Delahunty, & Partington, 2016). Asynchronous interaction has been shown to be most effective when learners participate in mediated discussion and meaningful activities (Delahunty et al., 2014). Arguably, when interaction forms the social practice of a learning community, an improvement in the quality of the learning experience should also be expected.

1.1. Complexities of asynchronous discussion for sociality and learning

From a sociocultural perspective, learning is intrinsically social requiring the active involvement of both the more and the less experienced when negotiating new concepts. However, the reality for adults participating in online learning contexts, often juggling other commitments as well as study, is that asynchronous discussion can seem an extra 'burden' for which they may not have the time, energy nor the inclination to sustain (Exter, Korkmaz, Harlin, & Bichelmeyer, 2009), particularly if it does not appear to directly benefit their learning of the content (Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009).

Developing a social space in which online learners gain a sense of belonging and feel enabled to co-construct ideas is no easy task, and effective asynchronous discussion can be elusive. This may be due to inappropriate task design (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003), mandatory participation requirements (Arend, 2009), or risk aversion by educators towards implementing new technologies (Howard, 2013; Kreijns, Vermeulen, Kirschner, Buuren, & Acker, 2013). Motivation to participate can also be influenced variously by previous educational experience (Bonk & Kim, 1998), individual-focused learning goals (Owens et al., 2009), assessment weightings (Pelz, 2010), or visibility of the instructor (Lapadat, 2007). In addition, the *kind* of talk which unfolds in discussions can affect participation (e.g., long monologues, inappropriate academic style, lack of audience awareness), often with uncertainty about how written-like or spoken-like language should be in this 'hybrid' mode of discussion (Lander, 2014, p. 50). Even so, asynchronous forums are the preferred method of discussion for educators in higher education due to the ability to revisit, reflect on and revise writing, resulting in responses which are usually more carefully crafted than those in synchronous modes (Kim, Park, Yoon, & Jo, 2016; Mancilla, Polat, & Akcay, 2015). Among other things, interactions need to be purposeful and relevant as well as require an atmosphere where new understandings can be mutually and 'safely' negotiated with a degree of communicative expertise. These combined factors form the focus of the analysis presented in this article, which aims to explore the complexities of meaningful asynchronous discussion through which interpersonal relations are enacted simultaneously with co-constructing knowledge.

Language and ways of communicating effectively are complex. Sociocultural approaches consider the role of language in learning as *first* a social function before becoming internalized as knowledge, skill or understanding (Vygotsky, 1978). As social function, language is a semiotic tool for making meaning through which we construe our experiences in the world while simultaneously enacting social relations with those with whom we are communicating. Whether spoken or written, language constructs our world, being at one and the same time a *part of reality*, an *account of reality* and an *image of reality* (Halliday, 1989, p. 98) (italics added). Many years later Halliday described language as 'the most complex web of meaning we know of' (2009, p. 60). The social function of language in face-to-face interactions is often taken for granted; however, when discussion shifts to asynchronous modes, reduced opportunities for interactivity and immediate feedback present challenges for engaging in discussion effectively, in which reciprocity is seen as fundamental to the quality of relationships and helps to develop the sense of contributing to a learning community. Just as there is a qualitative difference between spoken discussion and written discussion, so too is there a difference between asynchronous ways of communicating where language is no longer fleeting as a spoken utterance, but rather becomes permanent in the written text: a conversation written down.

For asynchronous discussion to be effective, educators need to be cognizant of the complex relationship between interpersonally and experientially oriented dialogue moves and be aware of language choices through which the academic content is collaboratively negotiated. In other words, such moves entail knowing how to effectively facilitate knowledge co-construction while simultaneously enacting roles and relationships within the online group so that learners feel they are being listened to and their contributions are valued. When the social function of language (taken for granted in face-to-face interactions) is glossed over in the shift to asynchronous, the result will be 'hit or miss' dialogic experiences. Effective communication can often be difficult to achieve, in part because of the assumption that students *and* lecturers have adequate communicative skills, tools for negotiating intellectual content, and experience in asynchronous ways of interacting. An additional challenge lies in the incongruence of the mode for discussion – where the expectation for interaction exists, but where such communicative skills are often not made explicit. Thus, the aim of this article is to explore what characterizes effective asynchronous online forum discussion, with particular focus on how community building and co-construction of knowledge occur.

1.2. Theoretical framework

Coffin, Painter, and Hewings (2005) argue that linguistic analysis of online discussion is important for developing a knowledge of practice, particularly in the process of developing new pedagogies. For example, one aim of this article is how knowledge is built through asynchronous dialogue. Linguistically this can be analysed through *lexical* and *expansion* relations. Lexical relations are concerned with tracking ideas, such as those that unfold across the discussion texts like chains of words; they are related because they are repeated or because they have similar or contrasting meanings. Adding to this are logical relations of expansion (logicosemantic relations) – resources for describing links made *between* ideas, indicating how understandings are expanded and hence how new knowledge is developing (or has developed) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). Explicit understandings of how knowledge is co-constructed and the conditions under which this occurs is essential for informing strategies and practices that will enhance the online learning-teaching experience.

The present study used a combined framework of two complementary approaches to achieve the depth of understanding required: a linguistic theoretical perspective of language use in context – Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004), and principles drawn from Mercer's three-part typology of talk (Mercer, 1995; Mercer, 2000; Mercer & Dawes, 2012; Mercer & Littleton, 2007) – disputational talk, cumulative talk and exploratory talk. Disputational talk describes the tendency for unproductive disagreement (e.g., "yes it is" – "no it's not") and individual decision making in collaborative activities. Cumulative talk describes uncritically building on others' ideas to avoid "anything disruptive" (Wegerif, 2008, p. 356). Exploratory talk describes "a joint form of co-reasoning in language" (Mercer & Littleton, 2007, p. 62) and is ideal for maximising the joint construction of new understandings (see Appendix A). SFL will be discussed more fully in Section 2.2; however, both SFL and Mercer's talk typology are important theoretical models for this study as they position