Understanding Institutional Talk in Computer-Mediated Communication Environments at an American University

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Increasingly, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become an integral part of American university educational environments. CMC tools such as blogs and asynchronous discussion forums are used for a variety of purposes in these contexts, allowing learners and instructors to talk to each other beyond the designated class time and expanding the opportunity for reflection and discussion of course concepts. Activating prior student knowledge of a topic and encouraging reflection on new information are strategies that have long been considered useful for learning (Dewey, 1933). In large face-to-face undergraduate courses, there are few ways to enable this kind of discussion. CMC contexts provide spaces for these kinds of interactions.

**Pre-lecture Posts**
- An "I don't know much" preface followed by descriptions of personal or others’ experiences
- An "agentless" formal academic paragraph format + script formulations

**Pre-Lecture Comments**
- Agreement: preferred response
- Functioned to hold original poster accountable by questioning claims
- Took up a “pro” and “anti” supplement stance within threads, showing a level of debate often assumed not to be there

**Post-Lecture Posts**
- "Shocked" (so outrageous anyone would be surprised)
- Denied any change of state (it’s so obvious I already knew that)
- Displayed neutrality (doing being normal)
- Made assessments of new information (subsequent actions)

**Post-Lecture Comments**
- Surprise threads
- Critique was present (e.g. lack of federal regulations)
- Collective moral outrage

Our findings point to how delicate a matter it is for students to make public displays. Rather than viewing what happens in educational CMC as evidence of an inability to think critically or engage in argumentation, CMC conversations might better be viewed from the participants’ perspectives. Analyzing in situ, naturalistic data, such as blogs, provides researchers and educators interested in CMC environments with new ways of framing and understanding how students work up their knowing and make it visible to others. Rather than framing knowing as a static and discrete entity, a DP stance allows us to redefine knowing as an interactional accomplishment. Further, insights from conversation analysis and DP show how these public displays are delicate matters and must be navigated with care. If indeed public displays of knowing are delicate matters, it behooves us as educators to carefully consider and be responsive to the potentially troubling task of making such displays.

**Statement of the Problem**

Increasingly, computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become an integral part of American university educational environments. CMC tools such as blogs and asynchronous discussion forums are used for a variety of purposes in these contexts, allowing learners and instructors to talk to each other beyond the designated class time and expanding the opportunity for reflection and discussion of course concepts. Activating prior student knowledge of a topic and encouraging reflection on new information are strategies that have long been considered useful for learning (Dewey, 1933). In large face-to-face undergraduate courses, there are few ways to enable this kind of discussion. CMC contexts provide spaces for these kinds of interactions.

**Reconceptualizing Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) Talk**

Lamerichs and Te Molder (2003) and Friesen and Hug (2011) question the underlying assumption that educational CMC should be understood in terms of a priori argumentation structures or other researcher-imposed analytic frameworks. While by definition all analysis, whether inductive, deductive or otherwise specified, imposes the analyst’s categories, and never solely focuses on the language of the participants, Friesen and Hug point to the importance of attending closely to the participants’ orientations and discursive accomplishments. They suggest that researchers attempt to orient to the participant perspective of the discussions rather than the researcher’s perspective alone, shifting their focus from what should be happening (e.g. particular argumentation structures) in these environments to what is happening.

**Methodological Approach**

- Discourse analysis guided by the discursive action model (Potter & Edwards, 2003).
- We attended to how students constructed their beliefs, experiences, learning in this environment.
- We attended to discursive resources and linguistic features made relevant by participants.

**Context**

- Blog conversation tasks in a large introductory nutrition course
- Prior to lecture: experiences with and beliefs about dietary supplements
- After the lecture: what was learned and how understandings had changed
- 168 students, minimal facilitation

**Data Sources**

- 152 pre-lecture task responses (initial posts)
- 935 pre-lecture comments
- 175 post-lecture task responses (initial posts)
- 727 post-lecture comments

**Findings**

- Pre-Lecture Posts
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**Discussion and Implications**

Our findings point to how delicate a matter it is for students to make public displays. Rather than viewing what happens in educational CMC as evidence of an inability to think critically or engage in argumentation, CMC conversations might better be viewed from the participants’ perspectives. Analyzing in situ, naturalistic data, such as blogs, provides researchers and educators interested in CMC environments with new ways of framing and understanding how students work up their knowing and make it visible to others. Rather than framing knowing as a static and discrete entity, a DP stance allows us to redefine knowing as an interactional accomplishment. Further, insights from conversation analysis and DP show how these public displays are delicate matters and must be navigated with care. If indeed public displays of knowing are delicate matters, it behooves us as educators to carefully consider and be responsive to the potentially troubling task of making such displays.

**For further information**

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