Rich Social Interaction in a Synchronous Online Community for Learning

Deborah Tatar, James Gray, Judith Fusco

SRI International   CILT and SRI International   SRI International
deborah.tatar@sri.com, jim.gray@sri.com,   judi.fusco@sri.com

ABSTRACT

Synchronous online communities for learning have been criticized because participant contributions do not seem to build on each other. But overt measures of building do not adequately characterize the nature of communication in successful real-time interaction. Other factors, such as whether the participants understand the meaning of remarks, the light in which they are presented, and the *joint project* the group is engaged in may ultimately prove to be more directly related to learning prospects. This paper starts the process of thinking about these more subtle measures in the context of one example from one session in TAPPED IN.

Keywords

Online communities for learning, teacher professional development, joint projects, discourse

BACKGROUND

TAPPED IN is a technology available to teachers that purports to address the need for continuing professional development by providing an open, engaging and partially self-organizing real-time online community. TAPPED IN (www.tappedin.org) is conceived of as a virtual place similar to a college campus. Participants can conduct real-time online chats in the various rooms and buildings on the campus. TAPPED IN has met with remarkable success at a face level: an average of 700 members and 1600 guests log hours every month. Over a recent 8-month period of time, those members who logged in participated on an average of 11 occasions and had an average session length of 51 minutes. The time spent was particularly significant because it was volunteered by a group of people (teachers) who by definition already lead busy lives and because there was no direct, material incentive for participation.

This pattern of use suggests that the participants are receiving something of value. Yet, evaluating whether this is something of significance to learning poses a dilemma. Online communities have been criticized because participants appear to build on or elaborate each other's ideas rarely (Herring, 1999). But building may be only a rough measure of the conversational coherence that collaborative learning requires. Psycholinguistics, conversation analysis, and sociolinguistics point to the importance of factors such as understanding the meaning of remarks, the light in which they are presented, and the ability of the group to form satisfactory *joint projects* (Clark, 1996; Goodwin & Heritage, 1990). These more subtle indicators of responsiveness probably provide a better characterization of whether the communicative needs of participants are being met.

This paper presents evidence that participants are able to move from the joint project or activity of criticizing badly designed Websites, to the more complex activity of responding to a Website designed by someone who is at once present and a stranger---a sophisticated socio-cognitive accomplishment. Single cases such as this are important when a proof of concept is at stake or to make arguments about possibilities, as we do here.

SHIFTING JOINT PROJECTS

The structure of the seminar involved presenting different "Internet Inquiry" websites for critique. During the discussion of the first web site, a novice participant, Helen, mentions to the leader, Marty, that she has created an InternetInquiry about the Titanic (see Transcript 1). Helen is able to use the sophisticated technique of making an indirect offer---a statement with the potential to be treated at face value as a comment about the previous web site or taken up as an offer by Marty (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Clark, 1996). Helen also positions her offer through minimization: "It needs some updating" and "I've learned a lot since then." These minimizations probably have several functions: they act as an implicit request for reassurance, they lessen the imposition of her request and they show that the site has some emotional significance for her. Showing something of one's own in a public forum can be a significant personal and social risk, and teachers are often overly critical (Grossman, Wineburg, & Woolworth, 2000).

Marty chooses to interpret her remark as an offer. He encourages her to show her work by: 1) direct invitation to do so; 2) making her site the very next order of business; and 3), when she demurs, giving the further encouragement of "Awww… you're among friends here."

Transcript 1: The Offer to Show the Titanic Site (other remarks edited out)

16:58:14 Helen Marty, I did an internetinquiry on the Titanic which needs some updating now; however, I have learned more since then. It was my first internetinquiry. I don't know how much experience the last person had had.

16:58:36 Marty Shall we look at yours next Helen?

16:59:05 Helen It may be that disaster site.

16:59:29 Marty Awww... you're among friends here. Type /project and the URL. Close doesn't count.

16:59:48 Helen It is <TitanicURL>.

16:59:49 Marty Wait til we're done with this one, though.

One result of this exchange is that Marty and Helen have developed a project to show her site: she has mentioned, he has proposed and she has agreed. Another result is that Marty and Helen have set up a social situation in which she is going to take the risk of showing her site and he has indicated that a certain climate of response will prevail.

In part, their public discussion of the plan is a cue to the rest of the group that they will have to change their project from one of pure criticism to something else---if the rest of the group is paying attention and understands the force of the discussion. Difficulty maintaining topical discussions, such as that reported in other online forums, may be related to lack of focused attention. In TAPPED IN, people are also presumably multi-tasking, looking at the previous web sites, and pursuing different lines of thought and conversation. Marty reinforces the need by saying "OK... let's shift gears a bit and look at a person-made disaster. It's by Helen, who's right here, so be gentle."

The group appears successfully to have made a change in their joint project. People appear to pay Helen not only the compliment of their particular remarks, but also the compliment of their relatively sustained attention. 76 seconds pass between the projection of the site and the first comment. Other sites projected during the session elicited first relevant comments at 28, 31, 61 and 68 seconds. Additionally, most unusually, there are no public side conversations during the time when people are looking Helen's site or during the discussion, and indeed only one whisper during the discussion. There is some direct praise. People address her directly. Criticism, still a major purpose of the gathering, is mostly softened by praise.

By contextualizing our analysis in the on-going discourse, we are able to illuminate how Helen and her colleagues were able to engage in focused real-time behavior in an online setting, thus successfully redirecting their joint project. Through the investigation of relatively subtle patterns of online discourse in tandem with more overt ones, the field can continue to reveal the kinds of social processes that lead to learning and development online.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

REFERENCES

Brown, P. E., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some universals in language use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Clark, H. H. (1996). *Using Language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Goodwin, C., & Heritage, J. (1990). Conversation Analysis. *Annual Review of Anthropology*.

Grossman, P., Wineburg, S., & Woolworth, S. (2000, April, 2000). *In Pursuit of Teacher Community*. Paper presented at the AERA, New Orleans.

Herring, S. (1999). Interactional Coherence in CMC. *Program in Linguistics*, 25.