Examining Synchronous Tutoring in a Virtual World

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TEORETHICAL FRAMEWORK

The role of the tutor within a virtual community assumes specific features. First of all, because the concept of community fosters certain processes, and second of all technical features of the virtual environments in which the community lives are taken in account. The community assumes as its central focus group organization and sharing common goals (Brown and Campione, 1990; Lave and Wenger, 1991). The context-situated learning is relevant and connected to the idea of "distributed" knowledge (Salomon, 1993). According to this perspective, the tutor should push participants towards a more central participation, should fosters the social interaction, and should support the "emigration" of the knowledge from one source and its "appropriation" by the others. This paper explores the tutors' on-line role in a learning environment called Euroland.

THE EUROLAND PROJECT

Euroland is a virtual community composed by students, teachers and researchers from the two countries (Italy and The Netherlands). The community designed, built and populated a three-dimensional (3D) world. The content of the world included several "cultural" Houses, such as Houses of Food, Music, Art, and Travel.

The virtual world was constructed using the Active Worlds (AW) software (http://www.activeworlds.com) and through an action-research methodology (Ligorio, 2001). The software used differs from a Multi-user Objects Oriented environment (MOO) because virtual objects can contain other virtual objects and they can be visualized from the inside.

The community of Euroland was composed of seven groups of students (4 Italian and 3 Dutch), their teachers, some occasional visitors, a cross-national research group and three on-line tutors with different competencies. The students ranged in age from 9 to 14 years. The community connected to Euroland during the 1999-2000 school year. The interdependence principle (Salomon, 1993) was applied by asking the students from one country to build the cultural Houses for the other country.

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The on-line chats are the main source of data. The three tutors participated with the 57% of the total utterances in chat. Two different analysis systems are combined and qualitative analysis is provided.

The first analysis is carried out with a category system dedicated to the analysis of tutor interventions' (utterances) and describes how the Euroland on-line tutors exploit their actions within the virtual community. Three independent researchers checked the interventions' categorization. The uncertain cases were discussed until an agreement had been reached.

The category system of tutorship comprises the following four different functions (Ashton, Roberts and Teles, 1999; Talamo, Zucchermaglio & Ligorio, 2001): Managerial, Social, Technical, and Pedagogical.

Results show that the most relevant function is the managerial (20% of the total tutors' interventions). This function seems to match with the potentialities of the chats (Talamo & Ligorio, 2002). The other functions are carried out through the other communication tools embedded in the virtual environment (a mailing list available for the project, a discussion forum), in certain cases off-line and often face-to-face, within the classrooms.

The second type of analysis is done through the discourse analysis and it is aimed at showing the interactive dimension of tutoring a chat-based community. Discourse analysis provides significant data on the social construction of shared meanings in the community. Talk is considered as social action (Antaki, 1994) and contributes to identifying the functions put into action through talk by the community members. The development of tutorship is, in the case of Euroland, mostly negotiated in "talk in interaction" (Schegloff, 1992).

The chats were selected on the basis of relevant events in which the tutorship functions are more evident: a) Newcomers' arrival; b) Members talking explicitly about tutors' actions; c) Other members acting as tutors.

The chat analysis showed that tutorship is also the result of a negotiation process between tutors and students. During the presentation, chats' excerpts will be presented proving that: a) tutorship is a fluid, situated and dynamic process; b) tutors share their functions with the other members of the community.

CONCLUSIONS

In this project, the tutorship on-line was aimed at establishing a virtual community of learners. Tutoring on-line is a complex action, performed through four different functions: managerial, social, pedagogical and technical. The function performed most on-line is the managerial.

The discourse analysis shows that, in specific situations, the other members of the community cover some aspects of the tutorship. This result shows that a virtual community of learners has been established and, at the same time, new features of on-line tutorship are highlighted.

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