Connecting Formal and Informal Discourses to Create Yet Another Zone of Learning

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we focus on the "Question-Answer" function of the SOUTO system; the hypermedia authoring system, and classroom activities where learners make hypermedia compositions with SOUTO and discuss their compositions with the function mentioned above. Field tests of the system reveal that; 1. The Question-Answer function reconfigures social relationships in the classroom and thus creates a foundation for collaborative learning, 2. The Question-Answer function creates a field of informal talk, 3. The SOUTO system provides a foundation on which both formal and informal talks are constituted and woven together, and thus, transition between them is enabled. Based on these findings, we suggest that educational systems should be designed as mediators that hybridize school-like activities and non-school-like activities.

Keywords

supporting discussion, reconfiguring classroom activities, informal conversation

INTRODUCTION: CONSERVATIVE CSCL VS. RADICAL CSCL

CSCL researches can be roughly divided into two types. One is the conservative CSCL research that is based on existing concepts of what 'learning' and 'school' are, and contributes, as a result, to maintaining the present form of school and classroom activities. The other is the radical CSCL research that endeavors reformation of conventional school activities and culture. This paper focuses on our project that exemplifies the radical CSCL research. In the project we are endeavoring to reconfigure the existing relationship between learners and teachers, learners and learners as well as learners/teachers through CSCL systems design and thus to establish yet another zone of learning in school. In the following sections, we show (1) SOUTO system, the hypermedia authoring system, (2) how the system contributes to reconfigure conventional social relationships in classroom, and then discuss (a) significance of less formal personal exchanges in collaborative learning, (b) hybridization strategy for the radical CSCL research.

DESIGNING SOUTO SYSTEM AS A TOOL FOR RECONFIGURATION

SOUTO (creator/thinker) is a hypermedia authoring system that boasts skeleton set of functions to treat multimedia materials and simple GUI that allows learners to access the functions without difficulties. The Question-Answer function of SOUTO is designed to facilitate learners' conversation on their compositions. This function enables learners to create question or answer cards and put them onto the questioned/answered cards in a composition (fig. 1). The authors consider that the Question-Answer function contributes to reposition the interwoven agents, i. e., learners, teachers, compositions, and so on, that constitute the classroom.
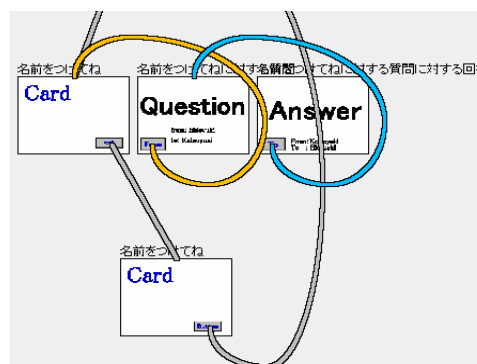

Fig.1: Juxtapositional view of question/answer cards and the composition

OBSERVATION IN SOUTO CLASSROOM

Commitment to peer learners: During question-answer activities in SOUTO classroom, it was observed that learners were encouraged to see their peer learners as audience of their compositions. The authors presume that the Question-Answer function, which establishes learner-learner information pathway, contributes to the emergence of this learner-learner relation.

- **Compositions as multivoiced products:** In many cases information exchanged through question-answer was imported into their compositions when they were revised and thus the compositions were imbued with the others' voices. This process turned the compositions from individual facilities into collective artifacts.

Emergent region of personal talk: While formal and public language was used in compositions, vivid   colloquialism filled with personal talk, joking, capering, decrying, and irresponsibility, appeared in question and answer cards.

- **Hybrid language and hybrid identity:** SOUTO system juxtaposed formal school language (compositions) with personal language (question-answer). On this mingled region of public and personal, learners lived two different "I"s simultaneously. One is the public "I" who engaged in school-like activities, the other is the personal "I" who engaged in emotional and private reciprocation of words with their peers.

DISCUSSION

The region of personal talk was full of the carnivalistic characteristics (Bakhtin 1968) such as abusive language, anger, parody, mutual mockery, and degradation of authorities. In addition, it was observed that the region was ruled by laws incommensurable with that of school-like activities. It is fair to consider that the region of personal talk appeared as the carnivalistic world in relation to the school-like activities.

SOUTO appeared as a boundary object upon which different languages, i. e., personal language and school language were constituted and woven together, and thus, transitions among them were enabled. SOUTO was a tool for making hypermedia compositions into a product for classroom activity, it was also a tool for person-to-person small talk about the composition. This hybridism allowed the students to construct their learning based on both of the regions. Hybrid tool ensures hybrid learning.

What is the significance of this hybridism? From the viewpoint of learning through conversation, this hybridism assures creative nature of conversation. Bakhtin (1984) discusses that carnivalistic nature is essential to creative conversation where knowledge is constituted through the interaction/negotiation among interlocutors. From the viewpoint of school reform, this hybridism is expected to constitute yet another zone of learning. The region of carnival is an integral part of students' lives and their reality as students. However, it has been excluded when student activities are organized as formal learning activities. Making learners stand between a school-like world and the carnival world provides the possibility to realize an unprecedented learning activity with the missing part, or the region of carnival, as one of the constituents. The newly formed zone of learning is a field where school-like activities are questioned and relativized. It is also a field where learning is anchored to both sides of school life, i. e., classroom activities and small talk, and where the students appear as hybrid agents.

CONCLUSION

Observation in the SOUTO classroom showed the Question-Answer function reconfigured the existing social relation in the classroom. However, what we saw in the classroom was not a monolithic "alternative activity" brought about by the function, but rather a continuous constitution of different regions where students stand on the intersection of these regions.

This study suggests that systems for radical CSCL should be designed as boundary objects that constructively produce conflict between existing school activities and carnivalistic activities, and establish traffic between them. The point of this design strategy is not to replace school-like activities with "non-school-like activities", but to make these activities encounter and hybridize into yet another zone of learning. It is important that, in this work, the school-like activities are not concealed from the students, but are visualized for them and thus repositioned by the juxtaposition with the other activities.

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