

# Presuppositions about "Good Communication": An Assessment of Online Discourse

Susan Bagley Koyle, Mark Aakhus

Department of Communication  
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey  
4 Huntington St., New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1071  
[bagley@scils.rutgers.edu](mailto:bagley@scils.rutgers.edu) [aakhus@scils.rutgers.edu](mailto:aakhus@scils.rutgers.edu)

## ABSTRACT

This study investigates the online discourse generated by a class of student interns regarding dilemmas they experienced in their work life. The interns use an application designed to foster a dialectical record of their experiences and differences of opinion about how to understand those experiences. We use discourse analysis to explore the students' presuppositions about good communication in the online text. We describe how students' presuppositions that good communication is "open and honest" often conflicts with their experience of superior-subordinate relationships. We suggest that conflicts with presuppositions can be used to facilitate further reflective learning and to shape the online dialogue.

**Keywords:** Collaborative Learning, Reflective Learning, Internships, Professional Development, Discourse Analysis

A central part of reflective learning (Schön, 1983) is the uncovering and questioning of assumptions. Reflective learning depends on learners surfacing their assumptions about the world that are represented in the actions they take to handle everyday dilemmas. Thus, in order to learn from experience, it is necessary for learners to reflect on how they make decisions and the assumptions that those decisions are based on. This study explores how an online communication forum of student interns was designed and implemented to foster students' ability to reflect on everyday choices in a manner that helps them develop more sophisticated ways of framing problems and taking action. The data for this study is drawn from an online archive of dilemmas ("updates") that students experienced and wrote about as well as responses to those dilemmas made by classmates.

When an initial update is responded to in an oppositional way, the interaction becomes an argument (Hutchby, 1996). This perspective allows an examination of what respondents treat as arguable and what normative codes participants use to identify what is arguable. This dialectical exchange helps make visible normative and factual presuppositions about communication at work and in professional life. Thus, a key focus of this study includes an examination of what respondents call out and presuppose about the accounts they are responding to. While the topics of the updates varied, most of the dilemmas ultimately dealt with how the student could best resolve or handle a dilemma in terms of communicating with a superior or co-worker. Whether it was how to articulate a grievance about lack or recognition to a boss or how to tactfully turn down a request for a date from a co-worker, students were primarily concerned with achieving what they perceived to be good communication in a professional environment. One of the major findings of the analysis of updates was that despite frequent reasoning based on the presupposition that "open, honest communication" would resolve conflict and prevent misunderstandings, many of the dilemmas that were presented in the online forum did not actually reflect this assumption.

We have also found enormous practical value, and we suspect learning value, in developing and teaching the student participants search strategies to help them make sense of the large database of messages produced in the online venue. For example, students were given the assignment to analyze their online work during the semester and compare the advice they gave in responses and their own actions. They were to consider whether there was a difference between the advice they gave to others and what they actually did and why this might be the case. The application allows participants to uncover and question their own assumptions, with the goal of developing reflective learning. It also allows an analysis of the online discourse to understand the students' presuppositions about communication in a professional setting.

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