

# Minority Students' Participation in a Knowledge Building Community: A Sociocultural Perspective

Anita Slater, Jan van Aalst

Faculty of Education, Simon Fraser University

Burnaby, B.C., V5A 1S6

[slater@sfu.ca](mailto:slater@sfu.ca)

## ABSTRACT

Minority students' participation in on-line discourse is discussed with reference to sociocultural perspectives on discourse and learning, which suggest that cultural and linguistic minority students' opportunities for full participation may be diminished, negatively impacting their learning.

**Keywords:** Discourse, appropriation, community of practice

## INTRODUCTION

Part of an ongoing study aimed at facilitating and examining the use of Knowledge Forum (a online database program which allows students to engage in communal knowledge building), the present study was conducted in an 11th grade class in a suburban British Columbia high school, where Knowledge Forum was used for a six week period during a unit on nuclear physics. Scardamalia, Bereiter and Lamon (1994) suggested that the differences in the participation levels of different types of students (e.g. high and low achievers, males and females) were all but eliminated when an earlier version of Knowledge Forum (Computer-Supported Intentional Learning Environments, or CSILE) was used. We wanted to find out if the participation levels and learning of the minority students in this class was enhanced by the use of Knowledge Forum. At the conclusion of the unit, we conducted semistructured interviews (in addition to other means of data collection such as classroom observation and analysis of the online discourse) with three minority students during which we asked them to discuss their experiences in their physics class.

## SOCIOCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND LEARNING

This project was informed by sociocultural perspectives on language and learning according to which language (or discourse) is not a neutral code but rather a set of symbolic resources which are appropriated by differently positioned people to accomplish particular purposes, and which dialogically creates and renews our social world(s). In this view, the acquisition or appropriation of language is not unproblematic. Bakhtin (cited in Gee, 1996) wrote: "The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word....Prior to this moment of appropriation...(the word) exists in other people's mouths, in other people's concrete contexts, serving other people's intentions." This view of the necessity of actively appropriating "the word" which exists in the mouths of others fits well with Lave and Wenger's (1991) notion of learning as participation in a community of practice. In order to learn, newcomers must be afforded opportunities for meaningful participation; however, this may not be easy when there are oldtimers who are already experts at the community's discourse, and one must appropriate their words. Some newcomers may be afforded more opportunities for participation than others. Communities have unspoken but generally accepted power relations which powerfully impact perceptions of who is entitled to participate in given situations. Toohey (2000) found that minority students' opportunities for participation were negatively affected by ongoing subordination efforts of some mainstream students.

## MINORITY STUDENTS IN A CLASS USING KNOWLEDGE FORUM

This initial research provided only slight support for suggestions that minority students' participation levels increase when on-line as opposed to face-to-face discourse is used. There was some indication that the slower pace of discourse was an advantage, however, two of the three students never contributed notes to the database which were written in their own words. As one student commented: "Um, the writing remained a long time, so I was just afraid to make any mistakes or errors in the, in my notes so I just find the information on (the internet) and I just copy it and paste it in Knowledge Forum." The reluctance to engage in the type of risk-taking that would have been required to make her error-prone English public may be linked to sentiments expressed by all three students about how they believe they are perceived and treated by many mainstream students. As one student bluntly stated: "There's racism, of course". When asked how that would affect his participation in physics class he said he would "Maybe just, say nothing."

The experiences which the students we spoke with reported suggest that their learning was negatively affected by their status as minority students in at least two ways. First, they must learn complex subject matter in what is for them a relatively unfamiliar language. Second, they are subject to subordination efforts such as racist remarks and exclusionary behaviour leading them to limit their participation, whether in face to face interaction or in on-line discourse. It is also

possible that minority students' contributions may elicit fewer responses in the online discourse than those of other students. Further research is required to investigate this possibility.

## APPROPRIATING THE WORD

This preliminary investigation of a beginning knowledge-building community has led us to renew our commitment to investigate ways that students are differentially able to appropriate classroom discourse and participate in classroom activities. Research efforts are needed to find ways to empower minority students to enhance their participation, and to take the risks which are crucial to successful learning. A shift in the way minority students are thought of has been suggested by Ross MacDonald (1999), who called for a paradigm shift from a conception of minority students as deficient (e.g. in language and cultural capital) to one of minority students as ambassadors to multiple ways of thinking and knowing. Such a perspective on diverse ways of knowing fits well with notions of collaborative learning, and with the goal of enabling a great diversity of students to come together in productive and respectful communities of practice.

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