

Gendered Voices: Provocateur in an On-Line Virtual Conference Course for In-Service Teachers

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Abstract: This paper is a report on the findings of a study conducted on a graduate level virtual conference summer school course. Discourse analysis techniques were used to examine the resulting transcript of texts for evidence of a democratic discourse within a community of learners. Findings indicate that gender is not masked in the text driven discussions on the Internet. Distinctive discursive styles are often sex class linked. Like face to face or classroom contexts, status is accorded unequally within discourse communities. Participants are not equal and are not equally attended or responded to. Educators need to take a serious and wary approach to accepting claims of ensured democratic participation in computer mediated communication formatted classes.

Introduction

Classroom discourse has been recognized as important to the educational experience of students. "Speech makes available to reflection the processes by which they [students] relate new knowledge to old. But this possibility depends on the social relationships, the communication system, which the teacher sets up" (Cazden, 1986, p. 432). Vygotskian concepts concerning semiotics and the mediation of higher mental functioning by tools and signs (including speech and language) have been used by cognitive scientists and educational researchers (Bruner, 1990, Wertsch, in Moll, 1990) to study the intimate relationships between discourse and learning. Vygotsky was concerned with how the "forms of discourse encountered in the social institution of formal schooling provide the underlying framework within which concept development occurs" (Wertsch, 1990, p.116). New concepts of classrooms and formal schooling have come of age with the advent of the use of the Internet and virtual conference forums and seminars. New forms of discourse are taking place within these virtual classrooms. Computer mediated communication involves electronic discourse. This is a written form of communication that reads like speech acts of conversation. Davis and Brewer (1997) have referred to this quality as "writing talking" (p.2). Computer mediated communication is different from face-to-face conversations in important ways. Participation is asynchronous and often there is a time lag between the initial posting of a message and the responses it generates. Interactivity can be delayed by minutes, hours, days. Every participant has equal access to the conversational floor and turn taking is never an issue. Software formats delineate each participants' contribution as a separate entity and it is listed in the order received. Speakers within these conversations are not able to talk over or interrupt another. Participants are able to refer back to previous speech acts within a discussion thread in ways that face-to-face experiences never afford. Conversations are scripts that are archived and saved as transcripts. Claims have been made "that the electronic medium exercises a democratizing influence on communication" (Herring, 1992, p.250). This claim is the focus of this study. If opportunities to engage in reflection and conversations are opportunities for learning, it is vitally important to be aware of the patterns of discourse being used in this new medium of communication. Is it really true that there is more equality of participation in discussions and with the lack of nonverbal status cues are these electronic forums classrooms where power and control do not mirror society's status quo?

The Study

Electronic discourse within computer mediated virtual courses supports conversations of practice and learning. There are performance features within these conversations that can be studied using the same focal lenses used

to examine face-to-face conversations. Conversations have negotiated meanings and values in either context. Is there a dominant speaker, one who contributes the most text, introduces the highest number of topics, receives the most number of directed speech acts? What are the frames (Tannen, 1996) set within the conversations? How do the participants position themselves within the conversation, within the discussion group? Are particular stances sex class (Tannen, 1996) linked? Are there participants who are not “listened” or attended to?

Transcripts were collected from a graduate level virtual conference seminar course taught during summer session, 1998 at Northern Arizona University. Participants were in-service classroom teachers. A kindergarten through high school grade range of classroom assignments was represented by these teachers. Course work included outside class reading assignments of selected current research in the field, a final research paper, and active participation in the on-line discussion forum with focus questions by the instructor. The seminar offered was a Tools for Teachers course designed to promote reflective practice. Seven teachers from four different communities participated in this pilot course during the summer of 1998. Five of the participants were female and two were males. An interactional sociolinguistics (Schiffrin, 1995) approach was used to examine the texts of conversations. This approach draws upon concepts of culture, society, language, and the self. The meaning, structure, and use of language is socially and culturally relative (Gumperz, 1982). Meaning in dialog, like that of conversation, is socially constructed. Data was also examined for evidence of micro displays of sex class linked gender identities; displays that are commonly associated specifically with either gender. An example of this is the use of tag questions. Female participants, much more so than males, tend to use tag questions as a discourse strategy to invite response and inclusion or solidarity within the group. (Tannen, 1994) Simple quantitative analysis was done to determine total lines of text generated by each participant, amount of participation, total sums of questions, statements, as well as number of directed responses sent and received. Patterns of participation were mapped/graphed and correlated to the contexts of interactions. Style, register, and “voice” or tone analysis were also used on the data sets to try to discover the dynamics among the participants.

Findings

“C___ [male], I hope I’m doing this right. I thought your observations were right on target. I subbed for high school and jr. high classes. High school was the best. I definitely felt the kids were on my level. They either took responsibility (sic) or they didn’t. How neat to have such a small class, but more importantly to know the parents as well as you do. How does that work where you’re at? Do the kids have problems that need home visits or is it even necessary in such a small town?” [S]

This example of a speech act from the summer school course illustrates the hedging, expressions of support and appreciation, and use of directed questions to elicit a response described by Herring (1996) as a Supportive/Attenuated style. This is a communicative style sex class linked with female participants. S has been teaching for over 15 years in elementary classrooms. She links some of her experiences with this beginning high school teacher. It is no accident that this just happens to be a male participant. The speech act was written during the second week of a five week course. C had joined the course the second week. S was responding to his first posting. Note that her beginning sentence sets a tentative tone “I hope I’m doing this right.” that tempers her statements concerning her own experiences. She encourages C twice concerning his observations and knowing his students’ parents well. She further empowers and encourages C by asking two direct questions, inviting C to talk more about his experience.

Contrast S’s speech act with the following from D, a male middle school teacher who has been teaching for two years.

“I tried something different, I read the remarks first and will reply, then I will read the assignments. Since M [female] is the only one who has responded so far, here goes. M, I agree that “schools who supported reforms, who have teachers collaborating and are used to restructuring are more successful.” However, as we have already discussed, the changes and reforms need to be bottom up and not top down. In C. county... we have district curriculum, but it includes so much that practically every teacher except the newbies know that they can’t possibly cover everything in most of them. Instead, they pick and choose those they feel are most important and cover them. Now the district (top down) is mandating benchmarks for departments. These are designed to put every class at the same point at the end of each quarter or semester, since ___ has such a transient population. That way each student can receive the same material no matter where they are. In theory it sound (sic) great but it doesn’t give teachers the flexibility to teach to the students according to their needs. It also varies greatly by the so called “curriculum specialists” who are supposed to be leading the effort. Some curricular areas are nothing more than dictatorships, telling teachers what they will be doing. Others, such as my math curriculum specialists, have given total freedom to our teachers to design our own benchmarks.... so I guess my point is that standards, benchmarks, or curriculum guides can be very beneficial (sic) if teachers have direct input into the documents. If not, they’re likely not worth the paper they are printed on.” [D]

This is one of D's shortest speech acts. The register is a little formal, a little distant and the tone intent is that of a lecture. He has directed this speech act at M, an experienced middle school teacher. The initial construction, "M, I agree..." reads as if it might be the beginning of a supportive communication like S's to C. Reading on reveals the true nature of the communication. It is an opportunity for D to display his knowledge and opinions in neutral, informative style that slips into the use of sarcasm when referring to "so called curriculum specialists". Her-ring (1996) posits that this is a male voice. D does use three modifiers. "I tried" in the first sentence and "here goes" in the second sentence. The last modifier is in the second to last sentence when he writes, "so I guess my point...". Each of these modifiers serves to soften the tone of authority that underwrites this communication. This sample is very typical of this participant in tone and style.

Looking at the data quantitatively, D contributed 32% of the lines of the seminar transcripts. There were 1,420 lines of communication and D wrote 450 of these. The next closest in number was S who contributed 314 lines. These results are similar for the number of speech acts. D had the highest number with 18. S and K (female) tied for second highest with 15. With this analysis alone, it might not be safe to say that D dominated the discourse. Further analysis of who received directed responses and who sent directed responses revealed an interesting pattern, see [Table 1].

D was clearly the most active participant, the most verbal text contributor and he was the participant who received the most directed responses. Initial speculations looking at the study data were that the females who used active discourse strategies to solicit responses and engagement by other participants would receive more directed responses. This did not turn out to be the case. K (female) sent 36 directed responses, the highest number of the seminar. She only received 12 directed responses in return. The most disturbing of all data was Ds (female) who sent 4 directed responses and received none. Ds participated the least, only 43 lines of text. The following is a representative example of Ds's discourse style.

"Wow what a good article, I personally use (sic) to read. I read a lot, I mean an inch or two thickness of books. Now, I have been molded into "the student teacher" So lately, I've read for credit, now I need to get back into "read just to read".

I think that the video club idea, about teachers seeing each other teach is interesting. I could see a lot of attitude (sic) come up in a situation like that. But I think that everyone would need to respond professionally and always have a good intent. I know that we have been told of something about ourselves that we do and are unaware of. This is a nice program, and I hope there is something out there for Music teachers. We are constantly decided (sic) on what pieces to buy, a similar discussion on music would be neat. If you know of any let me know ♩"

Ds had just finished her student teaching and so was the lowest "status" of the group as far as teaching experience. She alerts the seminar group to her status in this communication. Ds is a Native American for whom English is a second language. None of the participants responded to Ds. The important questions here concern why Ds's participation was marginalized. Her participation was not attended to, not responded to. Was this because of her writing or grammatical style? Was it because of her tentative comments such as "nice program"? She is the only member of the seminar to use an emoticon which has been sex class linked to females. It is highly likely that her gender, her ethnicity and her lack of experience as a teacher all were communicated through her text based communication and conspired against her. Ds was not seen as a competent participant in the discussions. Ds did not participate actively in the on-line seminar. The lack of response was surely discouraging.

Table 1: Mapping the number of directed responses received by each participant each week. G represents the total group. A number of responses were directed to the group as a whole.

K was an experienced participant in on-line discussion groups. She was a member of a state-wide program funded with an NSF grant that maintained a discussion forum with teachers across the state. She is the participant that sent out 36 directed responses and only received 12 directed back at her in return. If linguistic/technological competence is not the issue here, what were the dynamics that determined if a participant was read and responded to?

Further examination of D's speech act communications reveal a style of Absolute. D always made statements in a tone of challenge.

Example "...Yet the public continues to believe that it is the students, teachers, and school who are failing. Once again, I will return to the idea of Obsolete. We are not failing, the system is obsolete!!!" On the first couple of passes through the data I had missed the significance of the style. D was not only holding court and lecturing throughout the whole seminar, he was also inviting participation and response from others by being a provocateur with his strong, emphatic stances. The female participants explicitly asked for responses with direct questions while this male individual invited response with challenges.

Conclusions

D's linguistic strategies were the most successful in this seminar. This is not the equal, level playing field that some champions of the technology have promised. The discursive style which incorporated stances of the provocateur marginalized Ds's contributions. Ds did not have a repertoire of strategies to discourse successfully with D.

D never directed a response to the only other male in the seminar. D was clearly performing his linguistic routines for the "ladies" of the seminar. Did this also marginalize C who was the second lowest contributor in the seminar? Was this the dynamic that interfered with K's attempts to solicit response? Is this the linguistic display of a high status male that the female members of this seminar responded to? How could K as a female member of this linguistic community successfully compete?

Are there linguistically competent strategies that we should be teaching our students enrolled in virtual conference, web based courses? At the very least, we need not perpetuate the myth that all Internet communications and virtual participants are treated equally. They are not. Nor are their genders or linguistic indicators of social status masked. As educators using the new technologies to extend and promote learning opportunities for more and more students, we must provide some kind of scaffolding and protection for students like Ds who do not bring the same cultural contexts or linguistic experiences to the virtual conference table. Rather than a "democratic" appearing free-for-all that can lead to unequal power for participants like D, an experienced male provocateur, we should be setting up some explicit expectations and rules for participation in on-line discussions. The next virtual conference course will have a requirement that every participant in a discussion group must respond to all members of that same group within a two week time period. After careful analysis of the transcripts from this virtual conference seminar, it is apparent that equal participation on-line requires careful support and planning with some rules concerning attending and responding to other participants.

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