

Teaching and Assessing Online Discussions: A Case Study

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Abstract

This paper deals with some aspects of challenges faced by educators in teaching and assessing such interactions. The main purpose of this paper is to explore the challenges involved in assessing student interactions as well as for providing guidance and feedback to students. A Group Interaction Platform was created for students studying Communication Skills. An analysis of the posts based on the communicative function was performed. It was observed that while teaching and assessing online interaction, attention could be focused on production of meaning rather than on discrete units of such interaction. If students merely practice the discourse moves and do not contribute meaningfully to the discussion, the collaborative purpose of such interactions may not be achieved. Marking guidelines and rubrics that are based on discrete analysis of such discourse moves may reward students who indulge in a seemingly successful behaviour without contributing to the discussion. On the other hand, students who provide minimal but meaningful and timely responses may not be rewarded in such assessment environment.

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Background

Educators frequently report some common problems that greatly reduce the effectiveness of such activities. The root of these common problems can be traced back to four issues.

1. Since this is a developing field, norms of behaviour and rules of governance have yet to take a concrete shape.
2. Although factors such as length and frequency of messages are frequently evaluated, the construction of meaning may be sidestepped in this process.
3. Since the criteria for 'effective' online interactions are less than concrete, even experienced educators find it hard to develop criteria to assess and evaluate online interactions (McNamara & Brown, 2008).
4. Due to the absence of specific criteria, educators find it difficult to provide useful guidance and feedback to students. An environment in which the students must elect their own leader further adds to these two challenges. (Pathak, 2011)

This paper is written with a belief that some aspects of these problems can be avoided if classroom teachers and course developers are able to take into account the developmental level of the groups and the group processes. (Pathak, 2011) By identifying factors that facilitate meaning-focused group interaction, educators would be in a better position to guide and assess online interaction. The main purpose of this paper is to explore the use of a meaning-focused approach to assess online interactions. Traditionally, educators' attention has been focused on analyzing turns and moves in online discourse (Wishart & Guy, 2009). We would like to make a departure from this approach and direct educators' attention to the concept of Conversational Floor (CF) which has been well-researched in communication literature (Edelsky, 1981; Simpson, 2005).

This approach can be used for assessing student interactions as well as for providing guidance and feedback. The paper is especially targeted at educators who use online interactions as a means of building professional communication skills. The idea of conversational floors as a method of analysis grew from the dissatisfaction with the method of analyzing turns and moves in a discourse. Researchers such as Cherny (1999), have acknowledged that "notions of shared or collaborative floor seem to be more helpful than the standard turn-taking literature." It has also been found that the notion of conversational floor appears "more useful for theorising multi-threaded topic discourse. (1999: 174). As Simpson (2005) points out, turn transfer is not well-coordinated in computer-mediated communication and hence conversational floor offers a better alternative as an organizing principle in the analysis of computer-mediated conversation.

The emergence of leadership on the conversational floor is not really dealt with in the theoretical literature, and this paper aims to make a small contribution towards filling in this gap. As pointed out earlier, a leaderless environment creates particular challenges for teaching and assessing online interactional behaviour. Hence, this paper focuses on a particular use of the construction of conversational floor: leader emergence.

In the Conversational Floor (CF) approach more attention is focused on "what's-going-on within a psychological time/space" (Edelsky, 1981). The happenings can be

the development of a topic or a function (e.g. sharing resources, asking for clarification) or an interaction of the topic with the function. Examples of such events are: ‘*He’s talking about grades*’ or ‘*She’s making a suggestion*’ or ‘*We’re all answering her.*’ (Edelsky, 1981: 405) In asynchronous discussions, although they are seemingly controlled by one participant at a time, we also find examples of several interactions in quick succession. Simultaneous participations are, however, less likely in asynchronous discussion.

Later researchers suggest three definable elements to the floor: topic, communicative action, and participant perception. These three elements can provide us a beginning to form definitive guidelines to teach online interactions. (Pathak and Lee, 2006) Here is a brief description of the three elements.

1. **The topic of the discourse:** If the discourse has a well-defined topic, floor emergence is facilitated. On the other hand, multiple topics make it difficult for the participants to construct a floor, unless the discourse eventually focuses on a single topic or theme. In our study, we have chosen an interaction where the topic is leader emergence. Participants in this particular interaction co-construct a floor where the aim is to facilitate efficient and smooth emergence of a group leader.

2. **The communicative action:** The second element of a conversational floor is related to *how* things are being said in the discourse. Although this might be conceived as a ‘move’ as described in the traditional literature on discourse analysis, the illocutionary value of such communicative act is also taken into account at this stage. In our study, participants’ attention is focused on taking appropriate communicative actions with an aim to facilitate leader emergence.

3. **The participants’ sense of what is happening in the conversation:** The illocutionary value referred to earlier becomes important with respect to this element. In the analysis of a conversational floor, just as we focus on *what* is being said, and *how* it is being said, we also take into account how each communicative act is *perceived* by the audience.

As the features above suggest, the CF approach seems to be useful because of its emphasis on the contribution of the participants to the construction of meaning. Traditional and current practices are sometimes based on examining discrete discourse components in student interaction. Such discrete approach seems less useful when compared to the CF approach. Since the CF model focuses on production on meaning, it provides a more useful pathway for guidance and assessment. In the next section we describe the creation of a conversational floor in multi-threaded discussion. We hope that this case study approach will facilitate our understanding of the notions of conversational floor and its application as method of analysis. In a later section of this paper we aim to discuss how such understanding can be deployed by educators to guide and assess learning in this area.

Context and Framework

Pathak (2011) elaborates on a study carried out using the CF model. Thirty students studying for a course in communication participated in this study. This course was offered in a blended learning environment and students use group discussion boards to discuss their projects and assignments. For the purpose of this research, attention was focused on assignments related to an oral presentation. Students were asked to

choose a topic related to professional issues for a group oral presentation. They used online discussions for preparation of their topic. Each group consisted of 4-6 students.

Preliminary Analysis

In our study six different forums were created for six student groups. Each discussion forum resulted in creation of 19-27 posts. In total, 147 posts were generated in this experiment. An analysis of the posts based on the communicative function was performed. While 16 posts seem to be performing the communicative function of 'Initiating an Episode', 28 seem to be 'Responding' to the initiation move. As expected, a large number (54) of posts are Task-oriented and seem to be performing the 'Contributing' function. There are 9 posts which can be attributed to 'Contributing' to a social interaction. Lastly, 11 posts seem to be performing the task of 'Achieving closure' to the topic of discourse.

In order to analyze the various aspects of online interactions, including participation, initiation and response, response patterns and message types, a framework of message analysis was developed, drawing on concepts in conversational and discourse analysis. In the context of this study, any online discussion itself can be more meaningfully viewed as an *episode*, a discussion thread can be viewed as an interaction, and a message (post) can be viewed as a conversational turn (Kneser, Pilkington, & Treasure-Jones, 2001). A conversational move is then a unit within a post. A post may have one or more moves. (Schrite, 2006). For example, in our analysis we found a post that had three different moves: thanking, suggesting a plan of action, and proposing a time frame. Research has shown that rhetorical moves are commonly deployed "to maintain a specific power relationship" (McNair & Paretto, 2010:17). In our case analysis presented later in this paper, we present an episode in which a leader emerged through interactions and negotiations. One or more episodes create a *conversational floor*. For the creation of a conversational floor it is essential that a bid for initiation is made. A bid for initiation is 'wasted' or nullified if it receives no ratification. A bid is considered successful if one or more group members ratify the initiation. Further moves by the initiator and further ratification or confirmation by other members build a conversational floor.

Conversational Floor: An Analysis

In the conversation floor described earlier (Pathak, 2011), the floor space was created to discuss an oral presentation task that the students were assigned to as part of a Professional Communication course. Students were also encouraged to use the space for other tasks related to the course. After a few days of silence on the floor space (the Discussion Board), an initiator emerged. Although the post was brief, the initiator (Yang) had obviously composed his message very carefully. The initiator used a two-tier structure for the post: the main message and a postscript. The researchers (Pathak, 2011) hypothesized that the initiator might be willing to take over as a group leader. However, the initiator was careful not to impose the leadership on the group. He tried to convey both these ideas (Willingness to lead *and* reluctance to impose leadership) using a two-tier structure in this post. The post script can also be interpreted to be indicative of a hedging behaviour so that the leadership bid does not sound too desperate. Other researchers in this field have also found the first post (a so-called 'ice-breaker') of interest.

The interesting issue to observe at this stage is to see whether and how the first post is ratified by other members of the group. In this study (Pathak, 2011) Lek's post was neither a ratification nor a rejection of Yang's move. This created a tentative stand-off situation. For some time, it seemed that there were two initiators bidding to hold the floor. Interestingly, Yang (the initiator) continued to present himself as the leader. Yang used a different strategy this time. He presented a complete outline of the team presentation in a prescribed format. Interestingly, he gave proper credit to Lek (see the post above) and asked others to feel free if they wish to add any ideas to the outline. Once again he used the two-tier structure for his message. On one hand he tried to achieve closure to the brainstorming stage. On the other hand he suggested that the brainstorming was still going on (implying that he does not intend to force a closure on the ongoing discussion).

This strategy may be interpreted as a 'lurking' behavior on the part of the emergent leader. However, if the 'lurking' is responded to in the form of ratification, Yang would be willing to function as the leader. The ratification came soon (but not immediately) when Wang called Yang's topic "a good topic to follow up". Wang stated that he had added some points to Yang's proposal. As is the case usually, ratification comes in the form of commendation and (more importantly) positive and constructive feedback.

The ratification was seconded by Lek within minutes after Yang's message appeared, leading to the emergence of Yang as a leader. It is interesting to analyse Yang's post made after his emergence as a leader. The post was made just a couple of hours after the ratification by Wang and secondment by Lek. (The short time difference between ratification and Yang's follow-up post confirms our interpretation of Yang's earlier posts as a 'lurking' behavior.)

Yang's follow-up post (quoted above) shows the communication behavior of an 'emerged' (rather than 'emergent') leader. Following features of the post might indicate this behaviour.

1. There is a firm statement of closure. A vote of thanks is offered to group members for their contribution.
2. The future action plan is stated in no uncertain terms. imperative.
3. The discussion is now taken to the level of a face-to-face meeting.

Such smooth and successful construction of CF may not be observed in all cases. (Pathak, 2011). It is of course possible that the construction of a floor faces severe problems and in some cases the floor may not be successfully constructed. It would be interesting to see the issues faced in such 'unsuccessful' attempts at floor construction. From the data collected from the interactions within other groups, we can envisage the following possibilities and variations.

1. There may not be any bid for initiating the interaction.
2. The ratification comes in unclear terms, is delayed, or does not come at all.
3. There is unclear or delayed statement of emergence.

It might be concluded that the case chosen for analysis presents a pattern that is desirable, although the pattern may not exist in such a neat shape in many group interactions.

Conclusion

It may be concluded that a number of factors related to the student psychology, needs, mindset, and context play an important part in the successful use of online discussions. As educators, we need to analyse the context and the setting before deciding to set up online discussion tasks and define the parameters for the collaborative work. It is also clear from this study that the patterns of face-to-face social interaction are sometimes replicated and at other times redefined in online interactions. Further research is needed in the area of the formulation of developmental stages in online discussions.

The approach demonstrated in this paper has the following concrete implications for classroom practice and pedagogy.

1. **Focus on Meaning:** While assessing online interaction formally or informally, attention should be focused on production of meaning rather than on discrete units of such interaction. Marking guidelines and rubrics that are based on discrete analysis of such discourse moves may reward students who indulge in a seemingly successful behaviour without contributing to the construction of the floor. On the other hand, students who provide minimal yet meaningful and timely responses may not be (but should be) rewarded in such assessment environment. (Pathak et al,2005; Pathak,2007)
2. **'Lurking' and Active Behaviour:**The behaviour labeled as 'lurking' as traditionally found upon. Teachers tend to demonstrate less tolerance towards students demonstrating such behaviour. They would probably identify such students and ask them to be more 'active' which would mean persuading them to take more turns or asking them to take hold of the floor. The analysis presented in this paper forces the practicing teacher to re-think these strategies. Much of the lurking behaviour can actually be quite active. In our analysis, these listeners play an active role in later interactions.
3. **Understanding of the Process:** Construction of a meaningful discussion is a complex and time-consuming activity. It is much more time consuming in asynchronous mode. An understanding of this phenomenon would help the educators to encourage students to be more involved in the discussion rather than being merely engaged in overt interaction behaviour.
4. **Participation in a Developed Context.** The focus is shifted from mere initiation or turn-taking to timely and value-oriented contribution to the discussion. Also, questions such as '*Who is listening?*' and '*How attentively?*' can be asked and answered with ease within the premises of the CF model. Active listening and meaningful contribution do stand out with such analysis.
5. **Encouraging Leaderless Environments:** Although leaderless environments initially present a challenge to the learner as well as to the teachers, it is seen from the case study that such environments create an enriched interaction experience. (Pathak and Cavallaro,2006)We recommend that mature students should begin with a leaderless environment and should attempt leadership emergence as their first interaction exercise.

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