Chapter XVI
Competent Web Dialogues:
Text–Based Linking of Thoughts

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ABSTRACT

Conducting a dialogue on the Web is a matter of linking thoughts in digital conversations. Dialogue differs from discussion by not being aimed at beating or convincing other participants in the conversation. The present chapter highlights group dialogues as conversations in which people learn with and from each other. Learning dialogues have the potential of developing the learners' capacities for critical thinking and complex problem solving. The model of dialogue competence is suggested in order to improve the linking of thoughts in web dialogues. The chapter concludes with considerations when developing dialogue-based communication forms for learning purposes and contributes to teachers' demand for more support in pedagogic and educational issues.

INTRODUCTION

Digital technology has led us into new forms of conversation, and in some digital exchanges the similarity is so great that it has become natural to say that we are talking, even though we are actually writing. People have very different images of what communicating on the web and at

a distance implies. There are great variations of experience and competence. For example, there are generation differences and different kinds of software as well as different degrees of digital skill. The lack of common images, i.e. similar understanding of what digital conversations can be, is an important basic precondition which will have to be taken into consideration for many more years to come.

Web-based learning is arranged in university educations world wide, in the US (Finkelstein, 2006), in Turkey (Yuzer, 2007), Sweden (Fåhræus, 2003), Italy (Francescato et al, 2007) and China (Ng, 2007), to mention a few. Many are also the contributions aiming at improving and making sense of these learning situations, and in that endeavour several aspects come to the fore. Some researchers investigate broad collaborative aspects (Francescato et al., 2007; Fåhræus, 2003) and student participation (Hrastinski, 2006a). Others problematise more specific issues like e-learners experiences of time and the connection between participants' time management and their use of certain metaphors (Allan, 2007), or eye-contact as an example of the important non-verbal communication (Finkelstein, 2007; Yuzer, 2007).

Conducting a dialogue on the web is a matter of linking thoughts in digital conversations (Fåhræus & Döös, 2007). Contacts and conversations via the computer are growing in volume. With technology development people are successively changing their understanding of what this kind of conversation is, and of its possibilities and difficulties. When conversing with others via the computer we are moving in the border zone between solitude and company, being simultaneously present and non-present. In order to achieve learning qualities in these digital conversations, the interlocutors need to wise up on the digital interchange of thoughts as a communication form.

The present chapter is intended to contribute in that direction, essentially by borrowing knowledge concerning group dialogues and dialogue competence in real face-to-face situations (f2f),

i.e. where a group of people sit in the same room talking to one another. This knowledge is applied to written web-learning conversations, where mainly electronic conferencing systems (e.g. FirstClass) are used. Thus, the focus of attention is on the learning dialogue in connection with the text-based, asynchronous meeting, and in particular on digital group conversations in connection with courses, training programmes and university education. Often, though not always, these conversations are conducted with an element of examination or with a stipulation of presence and activity. Above all, though, they are meant to be good learning conversations, i.e. conversations in which people learn with and from each other. The chapter concludes with considerations when developing dialogue-based communication forms for learning purposes and thus contributes to teachers' demand for more support in pedagogic and educational issues, than in support of technical kind (Sällström, 2005). Briefly, the possibilities for synchronous digital dialogues brought about by technological development are also touched upon.

The term "dialogue" as used in this chapter refers to a special kind of learning conversation that will be presented below, one having both a structure and a learning purpose (cf. Wilhelmson, 2006). Such a dialogue does not come easily, even when people see and hear each other. A group dialogue requires practised skills, but its learning potential, i.e. the possibility it affords, in the company of others, of increasing one's understanding and pondering one's experience, makes it worth the trouble (Isaacs, 1999). When here applying knowledge from f2f dialogues this is done with the ambition to highlight also the potential for learning. As Tham and Werner (2005) conclude in their evaluating review of e-learning in higher education the "concern should not be just with whether online learning is conducted successfully using the available technology, but also whether the institutions did what they set out to, i.e., educating students" (p. 24). As shown

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