

Chapter VII

Computer Mediated Learning: Applying Burke's Pentad

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes that Burke's (1969) dramatisic analysis using the Pentad (act, scene, agent, agency, purpose) is a valuable methodological tool for investigating how learning theory offers a better understanding of mediated learning environments. It is argued that this framework provides a coherent and comprehensive consideration of learning and communication mediated by electronic means. Research into computer mediated communication needs to acknowledge the intertwining notion of the agents, acts and agency (mediation) within a specific scene, particularly in an online learning environment. Burke's (1969) work provides a useful framework for discussing and describing a mediated environment and appears to be a valid framework within which to analyze different learning and communicative environments.

INTRODUCTION

Computer mediated communication has become one of the foundations of work and leisure for many people. Unlike face-to-face communication, computer mediated communication (CMC) is virtual, consisting of a non-physical environment where each participant often has a unique location that is not physically visible to other participants to the dialogue. This means that individuals may seem to be physically isolated and yet connected via

technology. The computer-mediated environment has become a central feature of learning practice, with computers acting as almost ubiquitous tools for the facilitation and dissemination of educational information. For learners undertaking a course of study, CMC allows almost continuous connection to the place of study. Each individual in a class, a group, or course, thus becomes one potential point of analysis and may be very different from other students. Research into computer-mediated learning needs to be cognizant of the

potential variations in the physical environment of individual participants. This chapter deals specifically with mediated learning environments, and how to integrate both the social and the individual in an analysis of the environment. Burke's (1969) framework of Pentadic elements facilitates analyses that take into account the individual in the social framework.

Table 1 refers to a learning environment and demonstrates how Burke's Pentadic elements manifest within a computer mediated environment. Each of the five elements—act, scene, purpose, agent and agency—allows a clear illustration of different 'lens of analysis' (Rogoff, 1990). The elements, both singly and considered in pairs and triplets, provide for some deeper insights to be obtained by the learning facilitator focus, to one of an act undertaken by an agent for a purpose.

The activity of constructing knowledge can be taken as occurring within any situation where individuals think and act (Billett, 2003), which assumes that individuals can take a more active role than simply being passive recipients of socially derived knowledge. Within different situations, individuals often use roles to define their activities. Individuals can take on the role of learner or student, which gives rise to different ways of engaging in knowledge construction. Indeed, someone engaged in learning, that is, a student, is referred to as a learner, as someone undertaking activities that may result the development of knowledge. Burke (1969, p. xv) pays specific and detailed attention to the question 'What is involved, when we say what people are doing and why they are doing it?' This is a central question addressed in this chapter—what are individuals doing (i.e., activities) in an online environment (i.e., where) and why are they doing it (i.e., purpose(s)). This includes individual interaction and engagement, and the purpose(s) for their engagement.

In this chapter, I synthesize the findings of a program of research (Ruth, 2004) and integrate it within the conceptual framework of Burke (1969), which provides a conceptual basis for

Table 1. Description of Pentadic elements within an online learning environment

Element	Description
Act	learning, interacting, questioning, responding
Scene	learning environment, course, computer-mediated communication
Purpose	learning, getting degree, passing course, getting information about assignments
Agent	learner, student
Agency	computer, e-mail, Internet

describing and evaluating mediated environments and their properties. In doing so, the processes by which textually-based learning environments are enacted are examined, along with how participatory practices influence what constitutes the environment. The chapter commences this process by examining the interdependence of relationships among Burke's Pentadic elements and their application within a learning environment. The first section describes the Pentad, then explores the way in which tensions and relations among the Pentadic elements are manifested in the learning process; it proposes Burke's Framework as an appropriate, albeit novel, means to identify and elaborate these tensions. The next section demonstrates the application of the Pentad for the analysis of participatory practices in a mediated environment. The chapter concludes by discussing the implications of such an analysis for mediated environments.

Description of the Pentad

Burke's analysis using the Pentad is a methodological tool that can be used for investigating how concepts from theories of learning offer an

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