

Chapter 20

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Students' Anonymous Online Postings

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ABSTRACT

It is difficult to understand students' social practices from artifacts of anonymous online postings. The analysis of text genres and discursive types of online postings has potential for enhancing teaching and learning experiences of students. This article focuses on analysis of students' anonymous online postings using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The article argues that social practices reproduce during online interaction and artifacts embody such reproduction. A study involving more than 300 commerce students at a higher education institution (HEI) using a special purpose anonymous online consultation tool, the Dynamic Frequently Asked Questions (DFAQ), and social practices embodied in the artifacts is analyzed using CDA. The analysis used the three dimensions of CDA—description (text genres), interpretation (discursive type), and explanation (social practice)—and insights into students' social practices were inferred. The article concludes that CDA of anonymous postings provided insight into social practices of students and, in particular, highlighted the tension between perceptions of inflexibility of traditional teaching practices and student demands for flexible learning. Finally, CDA, as described in this article, could be useful in analyzing e-mail communications, short message service (SMS) interactions, Web blogs, and podcasts.

INTRODUCTION

Although Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been used to provide social critique (Thompson, 2002; Willig, 1999), assist in developing appropriate social interventions (Willig, 1999), empower people (Panteli, 2003; Willig, 1999), and unravel “how language conspires to legitimate and perpetuate unequal power relations” (Willig, 1999), the potential of CDA for analyzing online artifacts has not been explored. The strengths of CDA lie in making connections between social and cultural structures and processes on the one hand, and properties of text on the other (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997:277). Other text analysis approaches, such as Exchange Structure Analysis (Pilkington, 1999) and text mining (Ng’ambi, 2002), do not link text to social and cultural structures.

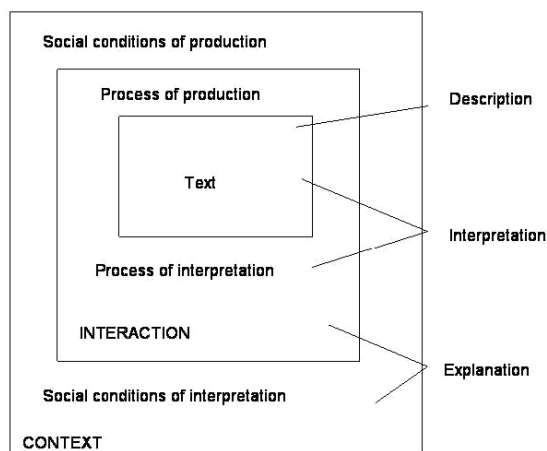
Fairclough (1992) contends that every discourse instance has three dimensions: it is either spoken or written *text*; it is an *interaction* between people involving processes of producing and interpreting the text; or it is part of social *action*, and in some cases, virtually the whole of it. The activities on the right (see Figure 1) of the model represent the framework of analysis in which a

piece of text is described, and then the discursive practices upon which it draws are identified and linked to the underlying power relations, which may be reproduced by the interaction (Thompson, 2004). The social interaction happens within the discursive practices, which produce text; through the analysis of text messages, evidence of social practices can be revealed or noted. Furthermore, the discursive practices are influenced by the situation or environment in which a participant is.

Atkins (2002) postulates three stages of understanding a discourse: (1) *social conditions of production and interpretation* (i.e., factors in society that led to the production of a text and how these factors affect interpretation); (2) the *process of production and interpretation of text* (i.e., how produced text affects interpretation); and (3) the product of the first two stages: the *text*.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: First a discourse theory is described, followed by a discussion on the research approach and analytical framework used. The case study is then discussed and an analysis of results explained. Finally, a conclusion is given.

Figure 1. Discourse as text, interaction and context (Fairclough, 1989)



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