Chapter 15
"Cross Talk": The Connected Stance of One Successful Student's Online Interactions

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Asynchronous online discussions can be complex and fruitful, mimicking their face-to-face counterparts in undergraduate college classes. However, some researchers note a discrepancy in substance and interest levels between online and face-to-face discussions. This chapter describes the interactions of one thriving student in an asynchronous online course. It analyzes the student's interactions with his peers, and uses these interactions to provide ways that online instructors can structure courses to optimize genuine and engaging online discourse. Additionally, it suggests that students and instructors who assume a Connected Stance show a depth of learning within the computer-mediated framework. Finally, it provides a unique format for analyzing online discussion boards.

"We had pretty significant 'cross talk' going on." A comment from one online student at the end of an online course

BACKGROUND

Can rich engaging interactions occur online? What about "cross talk," or students communicating with each other about various topics, in a short amount of time and space? As universities follow the global trend to increase online delivery of classes, researchers have investigated good practices in androgogy (Greene, 1998) and whether online interactions are as robust as face-to-face interactions can be (Wegmann, & McCauley, 2007; King & Doerfert, 1996; Mondada, 2006; Ruan & Beach, 2005).

This case study is a picture of one student, in one section of a class in a large urban university in the South eastern United States of America. The university is within the top ten universities in the United States, in terms of undergraduate student enrollment. There has been a steady increase of online course offerings since the university's first offering in 1997. The university was founded in 1968 and

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offers over 200 degree programs for undergraduate and graduate study, along with over 20 doctoral programs. The university faculty and staff have attracted over $122 million in research funding. There are over 1300 international students from 141 countries at the university. The university has an extensive program to help instructors develop online courses, including extensive training to develop effective interaction. Each online instructor spends one semester (45+ hours) attending a face-to-face course that supports the creation of an online course. In it, 10+ hours are devoted to course structure and ways to increase students' interaction.

The course where the data originates was housed in the College of Education. This course is taken by all students who are studying to be middle and high school content area teachers. The undergraduate course was an exploration of Content Area Reading Strategies, targeting middle and high school future teachers. Students in this particular section ranged from English, Social Science, Math, Science, Health, Physical Education, to Music majors. I wrote, designed, and delivered the course content fully online, based on previous courses I had taught. For each of the 10 lessons, students were expected to read a chapter from the assigned textbook. In total they were to complete six activities, four quizzes, and seven discussion boards, where they were expected to respond to an open-ended prompt as well as reply to their peers. A Discussion Board Rubric (See Appendix A) was used to evaluate each discussion board entry. It highlighted five aspects of each initial posting: a. content of initial response, b. depth of initial response to lesson question(s), c. content of reactions to peers, d. depth of reactions to peers, and e. mechanics of initial responses and peers' reactions. Students were given this rubric at the beginning of the course. They were evaluated and assigned points to each discussion posting, based on the rubric.

There were 55 students in this two-section class. This manuscript is the result of a focused look at one participant in a much larger research study. The other students' stances, or the ways participants used their language, were tallied and used as a comparison for the focused case study student. The research is true participant observation (Spradley, 1979), as the instructor of the course was also the researcher. In-depth member-checks were conducted by asking the participant numerous e-mail questions throughout the analysis. All parts of the analysis were done after the academic semester was completed.

Many online classes make use of discussion boards, on which students can interact with their peers, the content, and the instructor. As a co-constructed place in an online class, discussion boards can offer interactive possibilities, whether synchronous (i.e. real time) or asynchronous (i.e. not real-time). But, a discussion board may or may not elicit engaging discussions and interactions. Therefore, what are the elemental aspects of discussion boards that encourage students to wonder, challenge their peers, initiate their own topics and participate in ways that show they are deeply interacting with their peers, the instructor, and the content?

This case study sheds light on one aspect of effective discussion boards by examining one successful Master's of Education student's interactions in an online Content Area Reading course. In particular, the researcher analyzes the discussion boards, student tracking, course emails, and student grades using discourse analysis techniques. The analysis of all students in the course was beyond the scope of this study. Instead the researcher chose to deeply analyze one participant.

SETTING THE STAGE

This case study relies on the theoretical underpinnings of two lenses: the transaction theory of reading (Rosenblatt, 1996) and discourse analysis research methodologies (i.e. Mehan, 1998; Cazden, 1988, and Britton, 1993). These two threads