Chapter 4
Do You See What I Mean?
Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores a sociolinguistic approach to computer-mediated communication (CMC), by examining how higher education teachers use digital media to manage interpersonal interaction in their online courses, form impressions, shape and maintain relationships with their students. Previous studies have often focused on the differences between online and offline interactions, though contemporary research is moving towards the view that CMC should be studied as an embedded linguistic form in everyday life. The study of language in these contexts is typically based on text-based forms of CMC, (often referred to as computer-mediated discourse analysis). Within this, focus in the chapter is on the devising and implementation of pragmatic linguistics of online interactions; at a high level this refers to meaning-making, shared belief systems and intercultural differences; at a specific level this includes issues such as turn-taking and the sequential analysis and organisation of virtual 'interlocution'.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a critical view of the present state of play in different strands in computer-mediated communication (CMC) research. By focusing on the literatures of social interaction, constructivism and linguistics, a critical discussion of key theories and resulting emergent arguments in the use of CMC in higher education (HE) is provided. Given the rapid development of technologies and their resulting literatures of usage in higher education today, it is argued that this chapter is very relevant to all whose practice is influenced by learning technologies – such as educational technologists, education policy makers and administrators, higher education teaching and research staff, advanced education students, designers of virtual education environments and similar teaching tools, psychologists of third-level education.

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Throughout the chapter we reflect openly on current difficulties in several areas. The chapter begins with consideration of the selective and nearly exclusive reliance on social constructivism as the 'philosophy' underpinning computer-mediated learning, while its legitimacy has not been validated by formal research with adequate control groups. A subsequent section explores the validity of assessing knowledge construction through merely quantitative, or even exclusively automatic, analysis of interactions, implying that there is nothing else to knowledge that is different from quantitative factors. Thereafter, a section looks at the attribution of the benefits of asynchronous CMC to the technology rather than to tutor intervention and the underplaying of the value of memorisation as opposed to 'real understanding'.

Specific problematics in the field are then highlighted including the excessive claims of the benefits of online collaboration as a method of creating learning, which is based in no more than anecdotal evidence and an inherent confusion between theory and practice with regard to the nature of knowledge. Alongside this, there is contemplation on the emphasis of constructing afresh online communities of practice which are essentially organic structures that should be encouraged to grow, live and die naturally.

Finally, the chapter explores the severe difficulties of automatic content analysis, which remains at an unsatisfactory impasse to this day. Impediments here centre on the observation that meaning-making has taken place or can take place outside the formal learning space provided and the continuing need for frequent, personal, direct, real-time interaction between tutor and student, to supply direct encouragement and feedback. Of utmost importance is the need to take into account physical and cultural context, which is currently unrealised in computer communication.

Terminology and History

As all of the terminology used in the chapter is well known to the target audience of the chapter, we do not define terms per se; however, we believe it will be useful to deconstruct 'social constructivism' in the context of the work. Constructivism is not a unitary theoretical position; rather, it is frequently described as a continuum. The assumptions that underlie this continuum vary along several dimensions and have resulted in the definition and support for multiple types of constructivism. Typically, this continuum is divided into three broad categories: cognitive, social and radical constructivism.

Computer-mediated communication first appeared in the 1960s in the USA as means of transferring computer programs and data between remote computers in the interest of national defense (Levy, 1984; Rheingold, 1993). The educational potential was soon explored through early experimental dialogue systems, based on a 'socratic dialogue' methodology (Feurzeig, Munter, Swets, & Breen, 1964). The first analysis of computer-mediated discourse appeared in 1985, where Dennis Murray gave a very detailed analysis of the types of discourses which were prevalent in CMC. Since the early 1990s there has been a rapid growth in research into computer-mediated communication and computer-mediated discourse, the complexity of communicative situations with humans interacting together through computers has turned out to be much more multifaceted than originally envisioned. In the extensive literature on asynchronous online discussions, within the realm of computer-mediated communication, there is widespread agreement that online discussion enables interaction which would otherwise be difficult to achieve in face-to-face situations. (Conole & Oliver, 2007). There is a widespread acceptance, for example, in second language acquisition, that the use of electronically mediated communication has definite benefits for learners (Thorne, 2006; Warschauer, 1996). The benefits