

Chapter 14

Conversation Analysis as a Tool to Understand Online Social Encounters

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the application of Conversation Analysis (CA) as a tool to understand online social encounters. Complementing current analytic methods like content analysis and social network analysis, analytic tools like Discussion Analysis Tool (DAT) (Jeong, 2003) and Transcript Analysis Tool (TAT) (Fahy, Crawford, & Ally, 2001) have been developed to study both the content of online discussions as well as the interactions that take place among the participants. While these new tools have devoted certain attention to the development of social interactions, insights into how online participants form alliances among themselves and mechanisms for repairing a conversation when it breaks down remains lacking. Knowledge of online social order (or the lack of), both its genesis as well as maintenance, is essential as it affects the processes and intended learning outcomes in an online community. We argue that using CA, while not popularly applied for the analysis of online discussions, gives the much needed focus on the minute details of online interactions that are important to understanding social orderliness of conversations in a virtual community. In this chapter, we illustrate how CA can be applied in analysis of online discussion by applying Freebody's (2003) six analytic passes and suggest that CA may be used as an alternative analytic tool in a virtual environment where conversations are generally asynchronous. These six analytic passes are: (1) turn taking, (2) building exchanges, (3) parties, alliances and talk, (4) trouble and repair, (5) preferences and accountability, and (6) institutional categories and the question of identity.

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INTRODUCTION

Conversation Analysis (CA) studies talk in naturally occurring interactions. It originated from the works of Harvey Sacks (1974), who wanted to develop an observational science as an alternative means to examine details in actual social events. CA studies how social orders are produced and how societies reproduce these social orders through details grounded in “talk-in-interaction”. CA seeks to place a new emphasis on participants’ orientation to indigenous social and cultural constructs. It seeks to describe the underlying social organization—conceived as an institutional substratum of international rules, procedures, and conventions—through which orderly and intelligible social interaction is made possible (Goodwin & Heritage, 1990, p. 283).

In using CA to study interactions in a social context, we seek to understand the transaction of events in the social world. We give emphasis to the routine everyday events and norms of how the participants within specific social and cultural contexts involve themselves in forming, shaping, affirming or denying each other to define the social orders (Tan & Tan, 2006). While conversations traditionally involve two individuals, CA has been applied in broader institutional contexts such as schools from the 1970s. Researchers like Mehan (1983), Cazden (1986), and Sinclair and Coulthard (1992) have all carried out investigations into how *talk* is used as a resource by teachers and students to accomplish learning.

The application of CA in studying face-to-face classroom interactions have enabled insights into the transactions that result in learning, but its application to understanding online learning environments appears to be limited. Everyone recognizes that interactions in an online learning environment are different from face-to-face interactions (Waither, 1996) and hence it is necessary for us to understand the differences and how the differences come about in order to gain better insights into the norms of online discussions. The

processes and maintenance of orderliness of how participants in an online learning environment go about their business of transacting and sharing their knowledge to accomplish learning is at best an intelligent guess by researchers currently. In this chapter, we suggest using CA as a tool to uncover and illumine the micro structures of “virtual talk-in-interaction” so as to better understand the social structures that are embedded in the orderliness of online learning environments. The examples presented in this chapter are chosen to illustrate how CA and Freebody’s (2003) six analytic passes can be used and are useful for analyzing asynchronous discussion, the focus is not on the results and implications of each example analyzed.

BACKGROUND

With the proliferation of educational technology and its penetration into classrooms, educational technologists begin to realize the urgency of scrutinizing people’s on-line conversations as evidence of educational processes and outcomes (Mazur, 2004). Analytical methods like content analysis and social network analysis have been used by researchers to make sense of online interaction. Heckman and Annabi (2005) used content analysis methodology to compare between face-to-face interaction and online learning processes and found that students assume more instructional role and are engaged in higher order thinking processes in asynchronous online environment. Similarly, Hara, Bonk, and Angeli (2000) used transcript content analysis on students in a psychology course and found that the course participants engaged in lengthy and cognitively more complex discussions. The methodological concerns of applying content analysis have been thoroughly addressed by Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (2000) as early as the start of the new century. In their paper, they highlighted the need to examine objectivity, reliability, replicability and systematic coherence when using quantitative

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