Chapter 16
Juggling Channels and Turn-Taking in a Dual Channel Synchronous Class: A Conversation Analysis Approach

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As synchronous distance education classes increase in number, the need for understanding how turn-taking occurs in this environment can help professors learn how to set up communication interaction rules to improve the class facilitation and reduce extraneous cognitive load. This chapter examines how turn-taking occurs in the online synchronous course and ways that professors may create proficient turn-taking procedures. The traditional turn-taking rules identified by Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson (1974) were still applicable to the audio portion of the class. However, these rules did not apply to the text-based chat portion of the class. An examination of the use of conversation analysis when applied to the multi-modal online

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environment found that conversational analysis techniques were applicable only when both the text-based chat and the audio portion were examined together; when the two modes of discourse were decoupled, conversation analysis was ineffective.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

This study was set at a large, public research university in the United States. This university has a large and robust campus-based student body, but also has sizeable online offerings. Blackboard is the adopted course management system, used heavily for both campus-based and online classes as well as for organizational and administrative purposes. Although Blackboard allows for the integration of synchronous meeting modules/tools, at the time of this case there were no such tools integrated in the university's Blackboard system, nor were there any standalone synchronous meeting tools that were being adopted and supported by the university.

The default course types for the university are campus-based and online, and both undergraduate and graduate degrees can be obtained entirely online. Blended courses are typically counted as campus-based courses due to their use of physical meeting spaces and set meeting times on at least some occasions. The university does not draw a distinction between a class that meets entirely on campus and one that has some of its class meetings online, either synchronously or asynchronously, except for requiring that the official file copy of a syllabus note if a course may have online meetings. When students register for courses, there is no designation that differentiates campus-based from blended courses.

SETTING THE STAGE

The graduate program from which this case study was obtained offers fully online, face-to-face and blended classes. Class size in this program typically ranges from 15 to 22 students per class; the class in which this case is based had 16 graduate students. There were thirteen female students and three male students and the instructor was female.

The course was a blended course in which some of the class sessions were face-to-face and some were online, taught through WebEx videoconferencing software. WebEx allows for multiple speakers via video or audio; file, program and screen sharing; and synchronous text chat. It also has polling and whiteboard features.

The use of a blended course format was new to both the instructor and students. The instructor was experienced with teaching both campus-based and online courses, but had not previously met with campus-based students in an online format. Additionally, she had minimal experience facilitating synchronous online sessions other than