

Conversational Pragmatics and Learning in Virtual Organizations

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ABSTRACT

There is growing recognition of the important role conversational quality has in online learning, particularly within virtual organizations. Discerning the quality of online conversations poses a serious challenge for online designers and researchers. The purpose of this article is threefold, namely to: (1) provide an overview of conversation theory and conversational pragmatics, (2) identify a taxonomy of conversations and key conversational competencies for online learning conversations within virtual organizations, and (3) offer practical guidelines for evaluating online learning conversations within virtual organizations using conversational pragmatics. This article is based on prior work supporting that a disciplined approach to conversation can offer virtual organizations a tool for gauging online learning communities. It should be useful to those who study, develop, evaluate and moderate online communities for e-learning, e-business, e-government and other related domains.

INTRODUCTION

Conversations are the bedrock on which social interactions are built. Conversations are constructed by speakers/writers and listeners/readers from coordinated sequences of speech acts assumed to have linguistic meaning. There are a plethora of communication theories and areas of language pragmatics dedicated to the study of conversation. More specifically, there is a growing body of literature on conversational pragmatics and conversational strategies used to comprehend and generate meaningful conversation. Building on work in the field, this article attempts to extend conversational pragmatics to the evaluation of conversation quality within virtual organizations. To this end, it provides guidelines for viewing conversation quality based on conversation theory. This is accomplished by introduc-

ing a taxonomy of conversation types and key procedural competencies for guiding learning conversations and their evaluation.

The article focuses on conversational pragmatics as it relates to fostering of online learning within virtual organizations. Under the framework, understanding the nature of conversations carried out in communities of learning is at the base of successful collaboration within virtual organizations. The first part of the article provides an overview of conversation theory and conversational pragmatics. Next, it discusses the role of online learning communities within virtual organizations. The second part of the article evaluates the quality of online learning conversations based on conversation theory. It begins by presenting a taxonomy of conversation types and procedural competencies. Next, it presents evaluative strategies for gauging online conversational competency. The article provides key insights for improving the quality of online conversations within virtual organizations through knowledge of conversation theory and strategies for evaluating learning conversations within online learning communities.

BACKGROUND

Conversation Theory

The earliest roots of conversational theory can be traced back to the Socratic method and use of dialogue for exploring human knowledge and reasoning. Later dialectic approaches to philosophy from Hegelians and scholars from the Frankfurt School are considered early precursors to developing conversation theory (Boyd, 2004, p.182). Efforts to articulate formalized theories of conversation within the domain of conversational pragmatics were contributed by a number of individuals, including Wittgenstein, Habermas, Searle, Grice, Pask, Harri-Augustein and Thomas, Scott, Jenlick, Carr, Winograd, and Boyd. The development of conversation

theory is based in multiple domains, namely, philosophy, cybernetics, language pragmatics, psychology, and computer science.

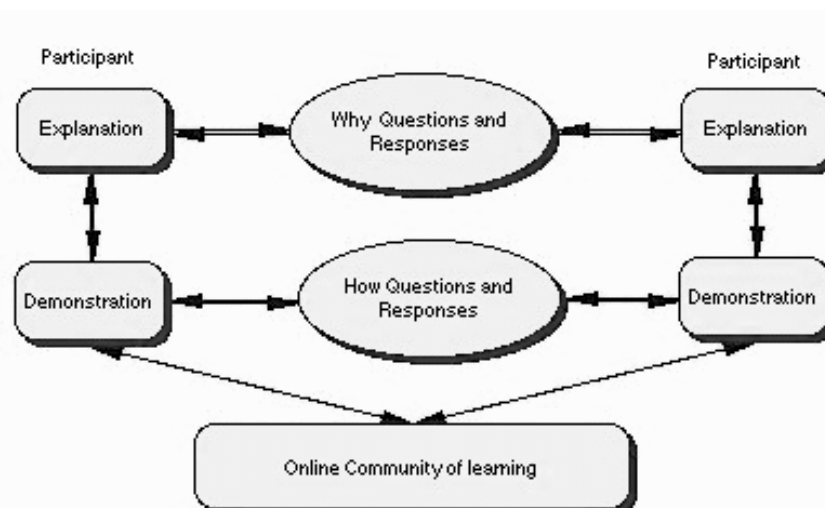
Probably the most noteworthy of conversation theories was that of Gordon Pask (1975), developed over the course of forty years (see reviews by Boyd, 2004; Scott, 2001). Boyd (2004) provided a simplified explanation of Pask's conversation theory:

A participant (p-individual) originates (by internal conversation) a conceptual procedure which when applied produces a representation or an action. Another participant tries to do the same, if the representations or actions that they produce in a shared space, are regarded by each other to be about the same, then an agreement has been reached, and the agreed concept can be given one label which both participants can confidently use in further conversation (Boyd, 2004, p.182).

The underlying assumptions of conversation theory are that humans learn by constructing symbolic representations acquired through conversational interaction and attention directing strategies (Scott, 2001, p. 27). The basic learning conversation model involves two participants discussing each other's conceptions (models) of a topic by exchanging two types of knowledge about a topic: (1) knowledge about how to describe a topic and (2) knowledge about why a topic means what it means. An illustration is shown in Figure 1.

According to conversation theory, understanding a topic entails that a participant can "teach-back" a topic by providing demonstrations and explanations of how and why (Scott, 2001, p. 30). In the most learning conversation model there is a minimum of these two levels of interaction. Harre-Augstein and Thomas (1991) applied conversation theory to teach individuals to achieve a reflective understanding of topics. In addition to understanding the how and why of a topic (learning conversation), a reflective learning conversation entailed that individuals achieve an understanding of how learning occurred as well as the purpose(s) behind the learning. Another important development came from Laurillard's (1993) application of conversation theory to differentiate general and specific knowledge of topics. This variant of conversation theory was applied to higher education organizations to inform organizational decision-making. In the area of online learning research, Luppiciini (2002) developed a conversation system modeling research methodology for studying computer-mediated communication (CMC) supported learning communities. A common strength of conversation theory approach is the advancement of models of learning conversations distinguishable from other conversations in terms of their explanatory power and commitment to the co-construction of knowledge. The next section builds on the theoretical framework of conversation theory by providing an overview of conversational pragmatics as a set of conversational procedures and principles that can be applied in con-

Figure 1. Basic learning conversation model



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