Chapter XIII
Applying Grounded Conversation Design to Instruction

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ABSTRACT

A grounded conversation design approach is posited as a way to study complex conversational processes within online learning environments. This approach is applied to online learning contexts to leverage conversation quality and learning. Study I examines conversations emerging within an online learning community created within an undergraduate class to critically discuss research. Study II applied conversational protocols derived from Study I within an undergraduate online editorial board simulation intended to generate critical discourse. The chapter suggests how basic grounded conversation techniques can be applied in a variety of online learning environments to study conversation and develop grounded conversation theory within the context of online learning. Grounded conversation design is based on the assumption that conversation is situated and grounded within the social contexts from which it emerges.

INTRODUCTION

Conversational interaction was gradually popularized over the Internet beginning with the advent of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in the late 1980s and early 1990s through communication technologies such as MUDS (multiple user dungeons), e-mail systems, instant mes-saging systems, and electronic bulletin boards. In 2007, online communities and blogs are well entrenched in education and society as a valuable way to connect people with one another to share information and build social relations. A myriad of online communities have been identified in the literature on online learning within formal and informal settings (Luppicini, 2007). Within

the current educational context marked by rapid growth of information and communication technologies (ICT), the advancement of conversational structures and processes are of central importance for designers and researchers. Instructional design research on the benefits of online conversation suggests that the structure of an online conversation influences the quality of discussion (Hewitt, 2003; Vonderwell, 2003). One ongoing challenge for designers and trainers is to find better ways to exploit the power of conversation to leverage online learning. How do designers and trainers discern conversation in online learning environments? What types of conversations are found in successful online learning environments? How can the quality of online conversation be leveraged within online learning environments to promote critical thinking?

One option is to develop a set of tools for designers to better study and structure conversations within a variety of online learning environments. The next section explores a particular conversation design approach for studying conversations and providing added structure to promote richer online conversations. It posits a grounded conversation approach rooted in conversation theory (Boyd, 2004; Pask, 1975) and grounded theory research (Charmaz, 2005; Clarke, 2005; Strauss & Corbin, 1967). As will be seen, a grounded conversation is well suited to the study and design of conversation as socially situated and embedded within specific contexts.

BACKGROUND

The view that conversation is central to design is well established in areas of design and education (Banathy, 1996; Schön, 1983). Under this view, conversation is a pervasive part of instructional design and serves a number of important roles in articulating learning objectives and goals, negotiating agreements and decision-making, guiding thinking and learning processes, nurturing critical

thinking, and promoting mutual understanding. Conversation is particularly important in complex areas of instructional design revolving around online discussion groups and online conferencing where *conversational processes* are intertwined with critical thinking and learning processes. In the context of instruction addressed in this chapter, conversation design deals with the application of conversational tools and strategies to achieve instructional ends in education and work. Conversation design may involve the use of a variety of theories and strategies applied to a myriad of instructional design contexts. A number of conversational theories and approaches have emerged in the last 20 years to guide instructional design work in education (Bohm, 1990; Hargrove, 1995; Isaacs, 1996; Jenlink & Carr, 1996). Bohm (1990) treats dialogue as a form of free association to provide individuals within a group the opportunities to examine their biases and patterns of thought in an effort to leverage mutual understanding and exploration of human thought. Expanding on this, Hargrove (1995) indicates, "A dialogue is a conversation where there is a free flow of meaning in a group and diverse views and perspectives are encouraged." In a slightly different vein, Jenlink and Carr (1996) identified general purposes of conversation: transacting (negotiating or exchanging within an existing problem setting), transforming (suspending personal opinions or assumptions and their judgment of others' viewpoints), and transcendent (moving beyond or "leaping out" of existing mindsets). Isaacs (1996) also highlighted the importance of suspending pre-existing mindsets in design conversation for the purpose of designing objects, concept, or mutual understanding.

Efforts to discern conversational purpose led to the identification of various conversation types (Brown & Palincsar, 1989; Jenlink & Carr, 1996; Palincsar & Brown, 1985). One area of early work on conversation focused on reciprocal teaching. In a series of studies, Palincsar and Brown (1985) investigated the influence of reciprocal teaching

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