The Literacies of Online Learning: a Linguistic-Ethnographic Approach to Research on Virtual Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes the case for a 'social literacies' approach to the analysis of interaction in virtual learning communities. It proposes a research agenda that will focus on questions of empowerment, marginalisation and exclusion, and the role of wider institutional and social practices in shaping the experience of participants in online learning environments. Some of the premises of the New Literacy studies are discussed, in the context of student writing and textual practices in online, global and multicultural learning environments. It is argued that there is a need for research into the way participants construct their own understanding of important social relations in these textual environments, and for the investigation of issues which contribute to the social shaping of education in the virtual domain. Such issues include: the maintenance of institutional and intellectual legitimacy through systems of assessment and the awarding of credit, the playing out of cultural difference amongst heterogeneous populations, and the nature of individual strategies of resistance to socialisation into virtual learning communities. Some research on online learning interactions is reviewed, and it is argued that key questions remain unexplored, about the nature of the communication practices developed by individuals and groups, and their role in constructing the experience of conflict for participants. A case is made for a linguistic-ethnographic approach to address the fact that social context in virtual communities is invisible and has to be inferred from linguistic evidence. An agenda of comparative studies is proposed, where the background of wider social literacy practice shared by participants in diverse online learning communities, is related to the different, more localised, practices of the communities themselves. Methods associated with this agenda are discussed, and a call is made for researchers interested in social literacies in virtual learning communities to collaborate on building a database of relevant evidence.

INTRODUCTION

Literacy has long been a central concern of educationists, as an end in itself, and as a means of socialisation. Now, with the development of the field of New Literacy Studies (Street, 1995; Gee, 2000; Barton 2001), literacy has become a lens through which we can take a critical view of educational practice itself. The basis of a New Literacies approach is to view reading and writing practices in any particular setting as part of a wider system of social interaction, rather than simply as evidence of cognitive activity by individuals. An example of this approach applied to learning can be found in work on students' writing in higher education (Ivanic 1997; Lea & Street 1998; Lea 1999; Lillis 2002). These authors attempt to look beyond the straightforward evaluation of student success or failure in learning to write as academics, and to problematise the notion of academic writing itself. They show that it is not reducible to generalisable skills or professional habits which experts already have and which students can acquire, or into which they can be socialised. It is one aspect of a wider set of practices through which participants in academic settings negotiate relations of power and authority amongst themselves, and between their community and the wider social world. From a New Literacies perspective we can see that, for a student, learning to read and write in the academy means successfully engaging with a range of such practices, including those that define the student-teacher relationship (task-setting, written feedback, assessment etc.), those that define student-institution interactions (procedures for access and use of IT, library, and other resources, examination regulations, credit-awarding processes etc.), those that define relations in the

disciplinary area (peer review and publication procedures, conference protocols etc.), and not least those that re-shape relations in the personal-cultural domain (choice of language registers, discussion-behaviours etc.).

The need to successfully engage with these practices remains the same in an educational environment that is increasingly characterised by distance teaching mediated via digital technologies. But there are barriers to successful engagement online which are not present in the physical context, and these are not confined to problems with the technologies themselves, although these do play a significant role in re-configuring many of the communicative practices that define relations between participants in an online environment. I am arguing in this paper that chief among these non-technical barriers is the invisibility of the social and institutional context – the very absence of cues to authority, status, and the reality of power relations amongst participants, which is said to make online teaching and learning inherently more democratic than its face-to-face equivalent (Lapadat 2003; Swan 2002:26). Nowhere is the effect of this invisibility more acute than in the multicultural, global, virtual learning communities that are currently emerging in institutions of higher education in the developed world (Goodfellow forthcoming; Mavor & Traynor 2003; Selinger 2000:87-88; Mason 1998:9). There is a need for a better understanding of how these contextual aspects shape the textual interactions which constitute the 'visible' community in these environments. In particular there is a need for research into the way participants construct their own understanding of important social relations, like the relative status of teachers and subject experts, of themselves and their colleagues as professional adults and as students, and of the roles that dominant and marginal literacy practices (Street 1995) play in this construction.

But to carry out research into social literacy practices online is not an easy matter, not least because of the ease with which participants may simply 'disappear' from view rather than contest practices and events which cause them difficulty. Furthermore, the "..broad-based shift from Print to Digital-Electronics as the organising context for literate-textual practice and for learning and teaching.." (Durrent & Green 1998 quoted in Lankshear, Snyder & Green:26) that we are apparently in the midst of , is forcing us to take account of practices in teaching and learning which are introducing a burgeoning variety of text forms into the communicative repertoires of learning communities (New London Group 1996:61), including graphics, moving images, and sounds. Whilst it is true that, for the time being at least, the asynchronous exchange of text-based messages, using email or other forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is still the dominant mode for online learning in the domain of higher education (Richards 2000), the rapid progress towards the convergence of audio-visual media and print that is taking place in the school sector (Snyder 2001) suggests that future generations of students in higher education will be working within a somewhat broader definition of literacy than the one we are accustomed to.

Whatever the medium, however, the New Literacies perspective reminds us that literacy practices are always socially grounded – that is what should distinguish our use of the term 'literacy' from discussion of individual skills or competencies. I want to discuss here an agenda for research into the literacies of virtual learning communities in formal educational contexts, which focuses on the social context of participation, not simply on visible interaction amongst the participants. The aim of such an agenda would be to investigate issues which are contributing to the broader social shaping of education in the virtual domain, issues such as: the maintenance of institutional and intellectual legitimacy through systems of assessment and the awarding of credit, the playing out of cultural difference amongst heterogeneous populations, and the nature of individual strategies of resistance to socialisation into virtual learning communities. The methods appropriate to such research are drawn from the broad tradition of ethnographic studies in anthropology and the social sciences, foregrounding the description and interpretation of communicative practices, in order to provide a '..magnified image of the workings of powers and the deep structures of inequality..' (Blommaerts 2001). In the rest of this paper I will review some of the work relating to this agenda that has already been done at the Institute of Educational Technology and elsewhere, and outline a programme of studies which I believe would take the process further.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

I want to set this review of research into literacy practices in virtual learning communities against the more established tradition of research into online learning interactions (Wallace 2003, Garrison & Anderson 2000, Bonk & King 1998, Gunawardena 1991 etc.). Work on the affordances of CMC for peer collaborative learning (Bonk & King 1998, Swan 2002) and on social presence in online learning (Garrison & Anderson, Gunawardena etc.) has fed very productively into course design and the pedagogy of online teaching and learning, but the research methods used (content analysis of online discussion, attitudinal surveys, observation etc.) necessarily foreground those who participate actively. This can obscure the struggles, and sometimes failures, of individual learners (and teachers too) to construct the virtual social environment in a way that makes most sense to them. It may also render invisible other aspects of participation in institutional community, such as formal assessment processes, or the inculcation of professional and/or academic practices and values. In

seeking to move the focus of research in online learning away from the individual-cognitive orientation of socio-cultural theories of learning, and towards the social-practice perspective of the New Literacy studies, I am following a direction indicated by (Barab & Duffy 2000) in their discussion of the shift from 'fields' to 'communities' of practice in school-based learning environments.

In (Goodfellow forthcoming) I have used Bonk et al's 'microanalysis' of transcripts of online dialogue amongst preservice teachers (Bonk et al 1998:299-306) as an example of an account of interaction amongst learners online that does not go far enough in examining the causes of unequal participation. These authors describe one particular learner whose cynical, colloquial style of self-presentation they considered as evidence of a maturity of intellect and experience beyond that of the majority of the learning group. Other students' reactions to this person's 'articulate, creative, entertaining, controversial and domineering' online voice (Bonk et al op.cit:305), varied considerably, from imitation to criticism to intimidation, but there was relatively little debate of the substantive issues he raised. The authors theorise this in terms of a group 'zone of proximal development' (Wertsch 1985), which this learner had 'outgrown'. But for someone unused to communicating in the highly rhetorical style of N. American popular media, even to read samples of his language can be alienating. For example, on the subject of group work: "That check mark business is dopey. There are a lot of dopey ideas in education today. That brings me to group work. Group work sucks.." (Bonk et al op.cit:304). From a literacies perspective we could hypothesise several ways in which conflict between the writer and different sections of his audience might be inscribed in a language event of this kind. I would argue that it is more reasonable to assume that it is the presence of conflict, rather than a lack of maturity, that causes others to cease to participate in this kind of exchange.

Other accounts of the experience of learner-participants in online environments have raised similar questions about the nature of the communication practices developed by individuals and groups, and their role in constructing the experience of conflict for participants. Duin and Hansen (1994) for example, discussed the difference between the interactions of older and younger students in a collaborative writing network, in terms of the distribution of power: the older students acquiescing to "..established models of authority.." whilst the younger writers did not recognise the presence of the instructor and instead "..used the network to negotiate a larger cultural meaning of public stances and identities.." (p.100). Hara & Kling (1999), in a well-cited rare account of an unsuccessful online learning event, associated students' feelings of frustration with perceptions of disempowerment caused by ambiguity and unreliability in the behaviour of both technology and teachers. Nesbitt et al (2000) described facetious and 'off-task' behaviour by a few mischief-makers in a number of un-moderated learning groups, who deliberately targeted other students with mockery and abuse in order to disrupt their compliance with the requirements of the learning task. Mann's (2003) 'personal inquiry' into online learning reflects on her own experience of unease about her identity in an online group, and retrospectively analyses linguistic elements of her messages (eg: a tendency to avoid the first person) to show how this affected her self-presentation. Finally, in my own study in which the Bonk et al account is cited (Goodfellow forthcoming), I show students on an Education MA becoming marginalised in online discussion by the attempts of one articulate contributor to construct the interaction as something which is not 'a course' and the learning community as something that is not defined by the field of Education.

In all these examples, it is the nature of participation itself, not only its outcome in terms of learning goals or cognitive change in individuals, that poses the most challenging questions for researchers. And participation is chiefly characterised by the fact that is linguistic, and by the fact that its social context is invisible and has to be inferred from linguistic evidence. In the Institute of Educational Technology at the Open University, our own investigations into communication practices amongst participants on our online Masters courses, have taken the view that online discussions are instantiations of only one kind of institutional writing practice. Others include course guides, study skills web sites, resource papers, legal documents, student services information, private emails, assignments, feedback etc. We have also tried to remain aware that the ultimate aim of all this activity is in most cases the production, also in writing, of assignments to be assessed, by teachers, so that credit may be awarded, by a geographically and socially-situated institution whose own practices are primarily writing-based. Thus we have focused on, for example, the ways that students reference each others' contributions to online discussion in their formal academic assignments (Lea 2001); the problems of recognising and awarding credit for online participation (Goodfellow 2001, McDonald et al 2000, Thorpe 1998); perceptions of cultural difference in online learning environments (Goodfellow et al 2001); contrasting rhetorical demands in writing for assessment and writing in online discussion (Goodfellow et al forthcoming); support for students writing online (Lea & Goodfellow forthcoming), and participants' resistance to dominant practices in online discussion (Goodfellow forthcoming).

We are aware, however, that we are only just beginning to scratch the surface of the set of issues implied by a Social Literacies approach to research on virtual learning communities, and also that we have yet to develop methodologies which are appropriate to any significant scaling-up of the studies we currently engage in.

METHODOLOGY

As Blommaerts has pointed out, the overall project of Ethnography is inherently linguistic, as ethnography is widely seen as the description of the context of human behaviour, and language is inseparable from this. "…From an ethnographic perspective, the distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic is an artificial one since every act of language needs to be situated in wider patterns of human social behaviour…the ethnographic principle of *situatedness*…" (Blommaerts 2001 op.cit:5 italics in original). The explicit focus on language that I am proposing for the study of the literacies of virtual learning communities is intended to reflect the way that social behaviour online is primarily constituted, not only through language, but through texts – language given physical materiality in permanent, or semi-permanent forms (Barton 2001). New Literacy Studies provides us with a starting point for the study of online texts as social practice, the literacy event (Street 1995, Barton 2001 op.cit). Literacy events are chunks of social interaction in which texts are present in a real or symbolic way (Barton 2001 op.cit). The process of analysing the way that practice in a community is organised around literacy events, and mediated through the texts that constitute them, is what Barton (2001 op.cit) has proposed as a significant direction for Literacy research in general, and what I am calling linguistic-ethnographic approach to the study of online learning.

The study of literacy events in virtual learning communities requires attention to be paid to a somewhat wider textual context than is normal in research in online learning. In the Bonk et al case discussed above, for example, a full description of the interaction around the productions of the dominant contributor would need to take account of the characteristics of his style as a literacy belonging to the wider domain of popular discourse. In Mann's argument, also referred to above, reflections on the effect on her language of the awareness of herself as online-teacher-become-learner could profit from a wider analysis of the characteristics of teacher-talk in that medium. Many other aspects of interaction in virtual learning communities are similarly shaped by literate practices imported from wider social contexts. Online learning, like other domains of virtual life, is subject to what Gayol and Schied called "..an ambivalent plugging in and out of the real and virtual worlds.." whereby identities come to be constituted by both, but it is becoming increasingly important to understand where online communication practices are required to differ between social contexts that carry different degrees of personal accountability. Genres of discussion in online classrooms and those of worked-related email may coincide, for example, for much of the time, but where the electronic practices of the workplace are amenable to constant and subtle negotiation, those of the online classroom are not.

Similarly, the institutional background – specifically how a learner's relation to the formal school/university is textually constructed – can no longer be taken for granted in the virtual context. This has become particularly evident in the Open University and other organisations which engage in distance teaching where there may be no physical connection at all between the embodied institution and the remote learner. The student's perception of what and who the university is, is constructed entirely from the letters, printed material, web sites, and occasionally telephone calls that they receive, courtesy of a representatives of a few key institutional functions. In the case of the OU and a growing number of other distance teaching organisations, even the key role of teacher is often played by someone who is themselves peripheral to the institution in some sense, eg: in the OU they are part-timers. From our own experience of teaching remote students on our Masters programme, we can say that it is not unusual to find ourselves being held to account for university-level policies and practices which we did not author and over which we have little control. For the students, even those who have previous experience of campus-based learning, 'the OU' is their teacher and the members of the course team, and it is we who have to answer for all the voices that speak to them, in texts that range from the forbiddingly formal to the over-familiar, out of all the multiple invisible offices of the university.

Ethnographic studies focusing on the wider background of literacy practices and their relation to literacy events in the virtual learning community require methods which go beyond established techniques of content analysis of discussion transcripts (eg: Rourke et al 2001) or attitudinal surveys (eg: Swan 2002). To begin with, we need to look at participant experience across a wider spectrum than an individual course. Paccagnella argued some time ago (Paccagnella 1997) for a comparative, longitudinal analysis of human social behaviour in cyberspace, and although this, to my knowledge, has not been taken up it does seem to be what is implied by the analysis we have been developing here. Where a background of wider social literacy practice is shared by participants in diverse online learning communities, the relation between those practices and the more localised ones of the communities themselves should be amenable to study through comparison. Such studies might focus either on individuals' experience of a succession of online courses in the same institution, or on literacy events from different arenas of their dealings with the institution, or on individuals' experience of online courses over the same period of time in different institutions. Whichever study context becomes the focus, it is clear that we need to examine online 'conversations' in which the same participants persist, not just the content of individual

messages or the output of individual contributors. These conversations may be continued within continuous threads, or dispersed across separate threads, even separate conferences. Analysis of the discourse represented by these conversations needs to be done at a variety of levels: the signs and textual forms, the language used, the conventions observed, the turns taken, the ideas and emotions expressed etc. The characterisation arrived at has then to be related to a more general characterisation of 'background' literacies, a process which will require detailed evidence from participants' reflection on their general use of texts and literacy, obtained through interviews. These reflections, which should encompass people who have not participated fully in, or those who have dropped out of, the online community, as well as those who have dominated it, should be critical. That is, informants should be encouraged to re-examine online events and reinterpret them in the light of previous and subsequent experience. Inherent in this approach are a number of ethical and legal issues relating to ownership of online discussion data, and the right to 'observe' and reproduce it, that there is not space to go into here. We certainly need to consider the role of the researcher as participant observer, especially if their participation is as a teacher or in some other institutional role, and is thus marked in terms of the power relations which are the focus of the enquiry.

SUMMARY & CONCLUSION

A research agenda of the kind I have outlined here is ethnographic not only in the sense that it is focused on detailed description of the context of language behaviour in online learning communities, but also because it attempts to tackle questions about the nature of the knowledge that it is possible for us to develop, concerning the way that people conduct important social business, like education, in virtual environments. It does not focus explicitly on questions of the design of online learning, as important as that is. To do so would be to pre-judge the key issue of how these communities are shaped by their participants, from the raw materials of the social practices they bring from outside. The research questions which will emerge from this agenda are therefore not to do with identifying learning outcomes for individuals, but are concerned with characterising practice and the way this structures individual experience, and especially the experience of marginalisation and/or exclusion. Such an agenda can clearly proceed in parallel with the more instrumental kinds of research that are currently being funded in the domain of virtual learning, but in order to develop a set of questions which has relevance across a range of institutional contexts, particularly in higher and post-compulsory education, it is important to begin to build collaboration amongst researchers who are oriented to a social literacies perspective. One way to do this is, perhaps, to focus on the instrumental issue of how to create a database of evidence from participants in virtual interaction that will be amenable to the kinds of analysis I have described.

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