



AARE symposium abstract November 2016. Sociocultural SIG

Chair: Irina Verenikina

Discussant: Russell Cross

Title of Symposium: 'Understanding online discussion: socio-cultural and discursal perspectives'.

The aim of the symposium is to present preliminary findings from the implementation of a Guide for Productive Online Discussion (hereafter 'the Guide') across four Australian universities. The Guide was developed in response to a lack of explicit support for effective online discussion in which knowledge can be co-constructed. It was designed to support and upskill university lecturers and students in the use of asynchronous forums, as asynchronous forums are a frequently used mode for discussion in higher education. Their appeal lies in the flexibility about when participants (students and staff) engage in dialogue so that opportunities for reflection and redrafting are increased. The literature demonstrates that it cannot be assumed that lecturers or students have adequate online communicative skills for engaging in productive discussion - which can often be less than satisfying experiences - and that such skills need to be explicitly taught (Delahunty, Verenikina, & Jones, 2014). The project aims were twofold: to support lecturers in scaffolding student participation through tasks designed to promote effective discussion (as opposed to dutifully 'posting' responses); and to improve student understanding of their learning. This was achieved through providing explicit strategies for engaging in the forums for the purposes of building sociality and co-constructing knowledge. The project is a partnership with four universities led by the University of Wollongong together with University of the Sunshine Coast, Central Queensland University and Victoria University, Melbourne as part of an Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) project (Ref: SD15-5131). The presentations involve two of the four participating institutions. The project moves beyond providing information about communication protocols such as Netiquette, to explicit, evidence-based strategies for engaging students in learning and for understanding ways of communicating effectively in technology-mediated environments. As part of routine teaching practice, a range of students (undergraduate and postgraduate) studying in a variety of modes (i.e. flexible delivery, fully online) were provided with specially designed communicative tools to support them to engage in productive forum discussion.



This symposium relates different strands and findings emerging from the participating universities, using socio-cultural approaches to learning and language to illustrate the richness these complementary theories can bring to research sites.

The colloquium will begin with a brief introduction to the project followed by presentation of four papers drawn from three of the four participating institutions. Final discussion will be initiated by Dr Russell Cross (University of Melbourne) and Associate Professor Irina Verenikina (University of Wollongong) around such questions as:

- What can we learn about the nature of online teaching from the project?
- What are some of the barriers to engaging in online discussion from the perspectives of staff? What, if any, principles for the design of online discussion tasks are emerging from the study? Are these generic or discipline specific?
- What is the contribution of contemporary work in fields such as educational linguistics and sociology to socio-cultural theory?

The final discussion will also address questions raised by symposium attendees.

Presenter 1: Dr Janine Delahunty (University of Wollongong)

Evaluating a guide for productive online discussion: lecturers' perspectives

Ready or not, teaching staff in higher education are expected to embrace various technologies in learning and teaching. For online discussion to be productive, lecturers need not only to be cognizant of the complex relationship between interpersonally and experientially oriented dialogue moves, but also be aware of language choices through which the academic content of the subject is collaboratively negotiated (Verenikina, Delahunty and Jones, in press). Thus it is important for lecturers (as well as students) to understand how to manage this mode of communication, in which face-to-face pedagogies are not directly transferable due to the gap created by separation in time, place, physical and geographical location and the 'interruption' this creates for discussion (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014). This paper reports the experiences of staff at a large regional university. Firstly it presents data collected through an anonymous online survey for the purpose of understanding lecturers' needs, and provides a contextual



backdrop for how online discussion was experienced by staff across two faculties. Secondly, it describes the implementation of the Guide, specifically the attitudes and opinions of interviewed lecturers who used the Guide. The project sought to better understand the experience of lecturers using online forums for co-constructing knowledge from the perspectives of cultural-historical theory (originated by Vygotsky 1978) which allows us to conceptualise effective social interactions through notions of scaffolding (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005), and systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). Combining these frameworks allowed us to explore the lecturers' conceptions of the role of dialogue in the teaching-learning experience. Using the SFL resource of Appraisal (Martin & White, 2005) close examination of attitudes and opinions was enabled through a comprehensive range of descriptive categories for evaluative language choices that lecturers used to reflect on their experience.

Delahunty, J., Verenikina, I. & Jones, P. (2014). Socio-emotional connections: identity, belonging and learning in online interactions. A literature review. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*. 23 (2), 243-265

Halliday, M. & Matthiessen, C. (2014). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, 4th Edn. Abingdon, Oxford, UK: Routledge.

Hammond, J. & Gibbons, P. (2005). Putting scaffolding to work: The contribution of scaffolding in articulating ESL education. *Prospect*, 20(1), 6–30.

Martin, J. R. & White, P. R. (2005). *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*. NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Verenikina, I., Delahunty, J. & Jones P. (in press). Scaffolding productive online discussion to enhance university students' learning. *The Internet and Higher Education*

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind In Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Presenter 2: Dr Pauline Jones (University of Wollongong)

The dynamic life of ideas: Collaborative knowledge building in asynchronous online forums

This presentation explores the dialogue generated in two asynchronous online forum discussions when students and staff in an educational psychology subject were provided



with an interaction guide to facilitate collaborative knowledge construction. The analysis is informed by the dual perspectives of systemic functional linguistic theory (Halliday 1978) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1978, Daniels 2010). Combining these frameworks allowed us to explore the dialogue from both the broad contextual or macro-level perspective of contemporary knowledge practices in tertiary settings and the unfolding or micro-level language choices as participants interact move by move to construct the learning environment. Because SFL theory approaches cognition from the perspective of meaning-making, the linguistic data provide useful insights into students' learning and the co-construction of knowledge (in other words, their changes in meaning making) (Halliday & Matthiessen 1999). Our major interest here lies with tracing the ways in which core concepts or ideas from educational psychology are introduced into discussion, how they are negotiated among participants, and the nature of common understandings arrived at. Preliminary results showed the guides fostered a high level of involvement of all the students in peer interaction and an apparent consciousness about the relationship between interpersonal and knowledge-based contributions. Drawing on systemic functional linguistics (after Halliday & Matthiessen 2004; Martin & Rose 2007), the analysis reveals the fluid nature of ideas, the relations between academic concepts and students' everyday and professional experience, and the role of carefully orchestrated language choices in creating intersubjectivity. In this way, we gain insights into 'the sequential and contingent development of concepts over time' (Daniels, 2010); in other words, in what Maton (2014) has described the 'wave-like' nature of the knowledge building. The contribution of Maton's work in the sociology of knowledge enables us to profile the unpacking of theoretical concepts into accessible forms of knowledge and their repackaging into more abstract ideas through the forum contributions by participants. Thus the importance of the interpersonal as the gateway to the experiential (Halliday 1993) is evident. The findings suggest a unique place for the asynchronous online discussion forum in enabling the interplay of guided reflection, sociality and individual reflexivity. It also confirms the importance of the expert as mediator in the process of collaborative knowledge construction.

Daniels, H. (2010), 'The mutual shaping of human action and institutional settings: a study of the transformation of children's services and professional work'. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*. 31:4, 377-393.



Halliday, M.A.K. (1993). Towards a Language Based Theory of Learning. *Linguistics in Education*. 5, 93-116.

Halliday, M.A.K. (1978). *Language as a Social Semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.

Halliday, M. A. K. and Matthiessen, C. (2004). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*, London, Hodder Headline Group.

Halliday, M. A. K. and Matthiessen, C. (1999). *Construing Experience through Meaning: A Language –based Approach to Cognition*. (Open Linguistics Series). London: Continuum.

Martin, J. R. and Rose, D. (2007). *Working with Discourse: Meaning Beyond the Clause*, London, Continuum.

Maton, K. (2014). *Knowledge and Knowers: Towards a realist sociology of education*. Abington & New York: Routledge.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind In Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Presenter 3: Dr Gwen Gilmore (Victoria University)

Asynchronous symbolic mediation in Masters of Education teacher education. So what do the tools do for student learning?

Masters of Education students should expect that their online interactions develop and link with pedagogical capabilities and capacities for their teaching careers. Students and tutors are increasingly expected to engage in online processes to enhance their student learning and experiences. However, limited attention has been focused on how tutors design these online experiences to negotiate meaning, synthesise information and apply new information to enhance these students' experiences (Gao, Zhang, & Franklin, 2013). In addition, whilst it is possible to argue that online discussions allow for more time to be thoughtful and reflective (Hawkes, 2006), asynchronous discussion forums may not be the best way to support collaborative and conversational learning models (Thomas, 2002). Australian research is starting to clarify the importance of online communications that go beyond requiring participation through question responses, through assessment related means, for example, but there are few exemplars and guidelines for tutors in designing online communications (O' Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015, p. 54).

The project draws on triological approaches for knowledge creation, to bring to the fore the learning practices and artefact processes as a basis for understanding epistemic activity



(Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2014). Triological processes aim to enhance processes on collaborative knowledge creation with concrete outcomes (Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2014, p. 54). The triological approach itself is based on 'theoretical traditions on learning where practices, object orientated, and artefact-mediated processes are emphasized as a basis for understanding human cognition and epistemic activity' Paavola & Hakkarainen (2014, p. 53) thus builds on the Activity Theory Engeström (2003) concepts. Activity Theory further enables a rich analysis of the context through the use of subjects, objects, tools, community, roles and outcomes within this online learning context. I also draw on symbolic mediation concepts drawn from Kozulin (2003) to present a rich analysis of this blended learning environment including my own self-reflective diaries, a student survey and interviews with some students in this unit. In addition, this research the aim is to make more explicit collaborative student communication through the development of focused cases and communication dialogues to enhance collaborative design.

This presentation illuminates how and why symbolic mediators, productive online discussion forums, enables students to clarify (or not) their interpersonal and learning skills. The findings from this project could inform future asynchronous learning contexts for Masters of Education courses.

Engeström, Y. (2003). Activity theory and individual and social transformation. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen & R. Punamaki, L (Eds.), *Perspectives on activity theory* (pp. 19–38). Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press.

Gao, F., Zhang, T., & Franklin, T. (2013). Designing asynchronous online discussion environments: Recent progress and possible future directions. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 44(3), 469–483. doi: 10.1111/j.1467-8535.2012.01330.x

Hawkes, M. (2006). Linguistic discourse variables as indicators of reflective online interaction. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 20(4), 231–244.

Kozulin, A. (2003). Psychological tools and mediated learning. In A. Kozulin, B. Gindis, V. S. Agueyev & S. Miller (Eds.), *Vygotsky's educational theory in cultural context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

O' Shea, S., Stone, C., & Delahunty, J. (2015). "I 'feel' like i am at university even though i am online." exploring how students narrate their engagement with higher education institutions in an online learning environment. *Distance Education*, 36(1), 41-58. doi: 10.1080/01587919.2015.1019970

Paavola, S., & Hakkarainen, K. (2014). Triological approach for knowlege creation. In S. Tan, H. So & J. Yeo (Eds.), *Knowledge creation in education*. Singapore: Springer.



Thomas, M. J. W. (2002). Learning within incoherent structures: The space of online discussion forums. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 18, 351–366.

Presenter 4: Dr Jo Luck (Central Queensland University)

Creating a research community for distance students: Using guided asynchronous online discussion groups.

Central Queensland University is a regional university based in Rockhampton in Central Queensland. Many of the Research Higher Degree (RHD) students are enrolled as distance students and rarely get to meet other RHD students in person. Fundamentals of Research is a course designed to provide guided support for RHD students to prepare their confirmation of candidature document. Despite actively encouraging the students to use the Question and Answer forum on the course Moodle site to connect with other RHD students, the students communicated primarily with the course coordinator but not each other.

In Term 2, 2016 guided asynchronous online discussion groups were implemented to act as a catalyst in the creation of a research culture among the RHD students. Utilising student and lecturer guides created by Delahunty (2014) three tasks were designed to foster conversations amongst the students about their own individual research projects, issues faced by RHD students when first embarking on their study and resources that they found useful and wished to share with other students.

This paper reports on the experiences of the course coordinator as she aimed to create a sense of community amongst the 2016 RHD student cohort. Data collected were personal reflections, student postings on the online discussions, data on which posts were accessed and how often, and an anonymous online survey.

The findings reveal how the student-to-student interactions changed as a result of the guided discussion groups on topics that were of interest to the RHD student cohort. The results will be used to inform other staff about how to create an inclusive culture of community within distance student cohorts.

Delahunty, J. (2014). Constructing knowledge, identity and community in asynchronous discussion forums: Socio-semiotic perspectives in online learning (Unpublished PhD thesis). University of Wollongong, Wollongong, NSW.



Bios

Dr Pauline Jones is a senior lecturer in Language in Education in the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong. Her research interests include educational linguistics, dialogic pedagogy, multimodality and aspects of teacher expertise as they relate to these areas. In addition to the OLT project described in the symposium, she is currently project leader of Transforming Literacy Outcomes, a research project funded by UOW to investigate the nature of literacy transition from preschool to senior secondary school. She is also chief investigator on an ARC Discovery project exploring the use of digital explanations in tertiary Science classrooms.

Dr Janine Delahunty is an academic developer on the Teaching Development Team in the University of Wollongong's Learning, Teaching and Curriculum Unit, working within the unit's diversity portfolio. Her PhD thesis (2014) focused on the TESOL online learning space, particularly on the complexities of forum discussion and the effect on the teaching-learning experience. Janine's interests include enhancing the learning experience of students in higher education - particularly for online students and those from diverse and/or less advantaged backgrounds.

Dr Gwen Gilmore is a Senior Lecturer in Literacy and Student Retention in the College of Education, at Victoria University, Melbourne. A New Zealander with 28 years of experience in Primary, Secondary and Tertiary teaching she brings expertise in on-line learning environments through work at Massey University in New Zealand and more recently in Victoria University, Melbourne. She adds a special interest in inclusive education, intercultural communication and the use of visual methodologies to these rich, international experiences. She also coordinates a sub-bachelor degree in Teacher Education, Arts Diploma of Education Studies (ADES), which prepares students who would not normally get into teacher education on the basis of ATAR scores to succeed and go on into full teacher programmes. Teaching and research in the ADES earned Gwen and the team of Diploma of Education studies a Vice Chancellor award for teaching and learning in 2015.

Dr Jo Luck is a Senior Lecturer in Information Systems in the School of Engineering and Technology at Central Queensland University, based in Rockhampton Queensland. She has 30 years of experience in teaching Information and Communication Technology at the Tertiary level. Her research area is how technology can be employed to enhance learning and teaching



environments. She has a special interest in using Actor-Network Theory to investigate how people and technologies interact in technology-enhanced teaching environments. She also coordinates a unit for new Research Higher Degree students that is designed to teach the students fundamental research skills and academic writing at the thesis level. She was awarded a Vice Chancellor award for learning and teaching in 2013.

Dr Irina Verenikina is an Associate Professor in Educational Psychology at the School of Education, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Wollongong. She teaches educational theories across undergraduate and postgraduate programs offered by the University. Her particular expertise is in sociocultural, social constructivist theory of teaching and learning which underpins the proposed project. Irina's contribution to excellence in learning and teaching at the UOW is recognised by Vice-Chancellor's OCTAL Award (2013). Her strong ongoing commitment to excellence in learning and teaching is also evident in her active role at the recently created Wollongong Academy of Tertiary Teaching Excellence (WATTLE) to which she was inducted as a Fellow. In 2015 she was invited by UOW to submit an application for a Citation for Outstanding Contributions to Student Learning to OLT, which was then endorsed for submission. Irina chaired the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research Congress in 2014 in Sydney where the team for this proposed project was formed