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ABSTRACT

Whereas in a traditional university classroom, important features of interpersonal relationships are most readily communicated by body language or tone of voice, in electronically-mediated teaching environments, absent such real time cues, even subtle metacommunications may take on added importance and power. Although a growing number of studies have examined explicit online communication, there is sparse literature relating to online metacommunication and its potential effect on the learning process. In the online environment, metacommunications may be conveyed by a correspondent's choice of words, response time, choice of font size, use of computer icons, and, at a less conscious level, a variety of parapraxes. To date, measures used to analyze electronically medicated communications have been largely quantitative, such as tracking duration of communications and number of messages transmitted. In this paper the processes involved in using content analysis to identify and understand metacommunications are explored. Several hundred e-mail correspondences and a number of online graduate seminars were examined to exemplify the identification and analysis of metacommunicative processes. It is recommended that teachers and students reflect upon their metacommunications, so as to understand some of the subtle processes that can serve to maximize the quality of education in electronically mediated environments. (Contains 13 references.) (Author)

Reading Between the Lines: Metacommunicative Aspects of Online Education

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ABSTRACT

Reading Between the lines: Metacommunicative Aspects of Online Education

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Whereas in a traditional university classroom, important features of interpersonal relationships are most readily communicated by body language or tone of voice, in electronically-mediated teaching environments, absent such real time cues, even subtle metacommunications may take on added importance and power. Although a growing number of studies have examined explicit online communication, there is sparse literature relating to online metacommunication and its potential effects on the learning process. In the online environment, metacommunications may be conveyed by a correspondent's choice of words, response time, choice of font size, use of computer icons and, at a less conscious level, a variety of parapraxes. To date, measures used to analyze electronically mediated communications to date have been largely quantitative, such as tracking duration of communications and number of messages transmitted. In this paper the *processes* involved in using content analysis to identify and understand metacommunications are explored. Several hundred e-mail correspondences and a number of online graduate seminars were examined to exemplify the identification and analysis of metacommunicative processes. It is recommended that teachers and students reflect upon their metacommunications so as to understand some of the subtle processes that can serve to maximize the quality of education in electronically mediated environments.

Reading Between the Lines: Metacommunicative Aspects of Online Education

The successful learning environment includes more than an instructor's imparting relevant didactic material. As University of Michigan Professor Wilbert McKeachie suggested in 1987, student attention, participation, motivation, and even anxiety levels are affected by the quality of interpersonal modalities in the teaching environment. Whereas in a traditional university classroom, important features of interpersonal relationships are most readily communicated by body language or tone of voice, in electronically-mediated teaching environments, absent such real time cues, even subtle metacommunications may take on added importance.

Although a growing number of studies have examined explicit online communication, (Gotcher & Kanervo, 1997; Hansen & Gladfelter, 1996; Landry, 2000; Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2002), there is sparse literature relating to online metacommunication and its potential effects on the learning process. Much of the developing research on metacommunications has derived from the information technology and education literatures. In the online environment, metacommunications may be conveyed by a correspondent's choice of words, response time, choice of font size, use of computer icons and, at a less conscious level, a variety of parapraxes.

I'd like to highlight three areas of online metacommunication: a) content analysis to understand consciously intended metacommunications; b) parapraxes to consider less consciously driven metacommunications, and c) the milieu or atmosphere in online seminars.

In a book chapter entitled, *Computer Conferencing and Content Analysis*, Paris Henri (1991) posed and answered an interesting question: "What is there in the content of computer conferences which warrants looking beyond the surface meaning of the exchanged messages? The answer: "The role of an educator...goes beyond understanding what is said about the subject under discussion...educators must be provided with the tools to draw the marrow from the bones...to find in the exchanged messages those elements which best reveal...the learning process" (p.118).

Content Analysis and metacommunication

Measures used to analyze electronically mediated communications (EMC) have been largely quantitative such as tracking duration of communications and number of messages transmitted. Because little information may be communicated in many words or much information in few words, Henri proposed instead a qualitative method akin to Miles and Huberman's (1997) methodology for content analysis in which message text is divided into units of meaning and then coded as categories. Henri emphasized that content analysis helps us to understand the learning process and "offers data useful to improving the efficacy of interaction with students" (p.135). Let me offer one example of this content analytic approach as applied to intended metacommunication.

In response to a mild critique of his paper in an online seminar where the faculty had noted the student's definition of pre-adolescence that included most years of childhood, the student posted the following response: *Since I am new to graduate school I would love to hear suggestions on refining an approach to reviewing the literature for my*

approved topic. I did not find the authoritative definition of preadolescence within the reading I did.

Table 1: Sample content analysis of metacommunications in a student-faculty online dialogue divided into units of meaning

Since I am new to graduate school...
[Maybe you didn't know I was new and just learning how to do this work.]
I would love to hear suggestions on refining an approach for reviewing the literature on my approved topic…
[Where should I have looked for references? And, don't forget you approved my topic.]
I did not find the authoritative definition of preadolescence in the reading I did...
[I challenge your feedback that preadolescence does not begin at age six, (a "fact" on which the student had based his paper).]

In this communication we could find three clear units of meaning, each apparently consciously intended as a response to the instructor's feedback. One can easily read between the lines to get a sense of the metacommunicative drift.

Parapraxes and metacommunication

Although she does not discuss unconscious communication per se, Henri states, "The metacognitive process is difficult to observe within a traditional teaching/learning situation, as it is rarely manifested or intentionally expressed by the learner" (p. 131). And although she does not say how to code for less conscious phenomena, Henri notes

the importance of identifying cognitive "mistakes" in online communication. This brings us to Freud and how he may help this effort.

In his *Introductory Lectures*, Freud (1901/1965) tells us that "everyone is liable" to commit parapraxes; for example, "misreading" misspeaking" slips of the tongue, or pen, and to which we must add "slips of the computer." With such normative "errors" we communicate conflict or ambivalence by expressing ourselves in ways not consciously intended. The assumption is that "errors" are most likely to occur when one is tired or preoccupied.

As Freud (1901/1965) wrote, "The fact of the parapraxis having a sense of its own seems, in certain cases, evident and unmistakable." (p.36); [it represents] "mutual interference(s) between two competing intentions, one of which is the disturbed intention and the other the disturbing intention" (p.64). According to Freud, "disturbing content may contradict, correct or supplement the disturbed one" (p.64).

When we write a paper or give a talk it is not difficult to correct a slip; however it is surely more difficult to do so online, once having hit the "send" button. Often we are unaware of our online errors until we re-read that text later on.

In his fourth *Introductory Lecture* Freud (1901/1965) described seven categories of parapraxes. I will illustrate each of these with examples derived from distance graduate learners and their faculty, including me; these examples represent but few of the dozens I found in reviewing several hundred online correspondences.

1. "Slips" (of the computer)-*In forwarding messages it is possible to include history messages that may not be intended for the recipient. For example, several faculty colleagues were copied on a correspondence for which there was a history of messages*

unrelated to the immediate message in which the two correspondents stated they were the only ones who knew how to teach certain courses that several of the unintended recipients also teach.

2. Misreading- *Students and faculty sometimes misread the time zone in which a synchronous seminar meeting is to occur and may log on at 2 PST rather than 2 EST.*

3. Forgetting of Intentions-*A student entirely forgot to attend an online seminar.*

4. Forgetting or mistyping-*A student, ambivalent about withdrawing from an online seminar, sent a note announcing her intentions to the registrar at the wrong e-mail address and so was not dropped from the course.*

5. Forgetting impressions or experiences-*A busy instructor forgot to respond to a group of students requesting additional commitments of time for a new online seminar.*

6. Losing and mislaying messages- *There were numerous times students and faculty requested resending of messages they had "accidentally" deleted but intended to save.*

7. Bungled Actions-*In writing an admissions report regarding an applicant about whom I felt ambivalent rejecting, I mistyped my password and got myself rejected from the website I needed to access to file the report.*

Not only have I been the recipient of each of these seven types of parapraxes on e-mail messages and online forums, but I've occasionally committed these errors myself. Though slips are often embarrassing to own, I realize how much there is to learn from my online errors, much as I expect students can learn from theirs. Altogether, attention to one's metacommunications, both conscious and unconscious, can serve to further the integrity of the learning process.

Milieu and metacommunication

Finally, on the topic of metacommunication and milieu, Ellen Laird published an article in the January, 2003 issue of *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled *I'm Your Teacher, Not your Internet Service Provider*. Laird wrote:

> If faculty members...are to succeed in online teaching, they must be prepared for attitudes and behaviors that permeate Web use but undermine teaching and learning in the Web classroom...Potential online instructors are generally offered technical training in file organization and course management software...but they would be best served by an unfiltered look at what really happens when the student logs into class...Confessional writing...can easily become the norm online. The lack of a face to match with a rhetorical voice provides the illusion of anonymity and thus the potential for a no-holds-barred quality to the discussion thread (p. B2).

Following is an example of this phenomenon from my own graduate teaching experience:

A student whose paper was the only one posted late for an online forum for a seminar wrote: *Apparently I have some bad Karma to burn off. As if the computer and research data (loss) weren't enough, when I awoke this morning, the motor in the refrigerator in our garage burned up.* Other participants in the seminar began to write in kind about their bad karma and the thread of academic discussion was temporarily waylaid.

Since as Laird and others note, there is no body language in electronically mediated communication, there is still tone and prevailing mood, particularly in the context of

threaded discussion. The ambiance, whether intellectually stimulating or over-stimulating (cognitively and/or socially), can impact the effectiveness of the virtual classroom.

In conclusion, as we would reflect on our work in the process of writing a paper or preparing a lecture in the setting of a traditional classroom, we need to take time to reread and reflect upon online text so as to be aware of the power of metacommunications in our electronically mediated teaching and learning environments. Perhaps as important as perfecting the content of online content is to reflect upon embedded metacommunications so as to better understand our own motives, attitudes and feelings as well as those of our students. In reflecting upon our online "listening posts" (Simon, 2003) we may be in still a better position to facilitate creative, sensitive, psychologically minded and high quality education in cyberspace.

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