Listserver Communication:
The Discourse of Community-Building

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify some of the characteristics of community-building discourse: the language forms that mediate the creation and nurturance of community in a Listserver context of communication; and the functions of this sort of action. Findings are derived from a three year ethnographic study of an international, 400 member group of academics who communicated with each other using ListServer technology on ten, subsequently five electronic mailing lists. Using Soviet Activity Theory and a Conversation for Action discursive model of communication to make sense of the *flow* of on-line communication, three recurrent patterns of communicative activity were identified as constitutive, though irreducible, to what was termed *electronic academia*. These patterns of communication were referred to as academic, administrative and community-building action, one of which is succinctly illustrated and discussed here. Characteristic features of community-building discourse selectively included here are naming the community; and civil language uses (i.e. warm and playful; grateful and positive uses). Functions of community-building action briefly presented are growth and continuity. Together, mediating functions and features of community-building are seen as foundation for productivity and conceptual change.

Keywords — Community-building, CmC (Computer-mediated Communication), collaborative learning, conceptual change, discourse processes, e-mail, ListServer technology, networks, telecommunications.

1. Background

This study builds both theoretically and methodologically on a number of pioneering studies of CmC (Computer Mediated Communication). Theoretically it builds on studies that have taken CmC as an object of inquiry (e.g.; Black et. al, 1983; Duranti, 1986).

Methodologically, it builds on studies that have taken an ethnographic approach to the study of this phenomenon (Murray, 1991). This study is different, however, in at least one important way. It is different because the starting point is no longer the same as it was ten years ago. Ten years ago, the study of CmC needed to be constructed as an object of inquiry in its own right. CmC researchers were motivated to identify both the linguistic (Ferrara et. al, 1991; Murray, 1991a; Wilkins, 1991) and psycho-social features (Keisler et.al, 1984) proper to CmC; different from and common to both oral-aural and written modes of communication. With hindsight, and the current popular explosion of telecommunication usage (Calcari, 1994; Quaterman, 1994;) , I have taken for granted these important concerns (i.e.; that CmC exists as a phenomenon both different and similar to other forms of communication) as well as the answers found to these questions. I was motivated by a desire to make sense of massive volumes of occurring CmC communication (e.g.; "the size of Montana" , Swaine, 1995) , and in particular what is accomplished by such forms of communication in a small domain of the Cyberworld (i.e.; what an international group of academic users are doing-in-the-world via CmC). Finally, because ListServer usage offers a world that comes to life exclusively in language use, I was motivated to explore the relationship between language use and activity; the nature of this micro-world; how it is that it is created; by what means; for what purposes; and to what ends.

2. Identification of a Problematic Situation

When a group of scholars communicate with each other in a ListServer context of communication, many things are accomplished with words, on-line: calls for

conferences, papers, jobs and applicants are posted; research findings are shared and discussed; bibliographies are compiled; exciting discussions occur, focused on book and article reviews, concepts and issues of concern; activists pass along political information in net-based activism. With members geographically dispersed and most face to face strangers, how does a group of scholars establish itself as an on-line community? What are the characteristics of language (forms and functions) used to mediate the creation, nurturance and sense of community on-line? And, in turn, so what? Why is it important that such communities exist? These questions have guided this analysis of the flow of on-line communication.

3. Overview of the Study

During three years I logged on to ten, subsequently five electronic mailing lists referred to as the x-lists. The lists, based in Southern California, were used by an international, 400 member group of academic scholars who shared a declared concern for "issues in education in modern technological societies and a special concern about ways in which educational systems are a source of socially engendered inequalities". Communication was supported by a ListServer program which enabled subscribers to post messages to a list in such a way that all subscribers to the list received copies of the posts. Members also communicated with each other privately in side-channeled communication and small groups.

The on-line flow of communication generated by this community, and as it appeared on my computer screen in the form of posted e-mail messages, was the focus of this study.

4. Procedures

Three kinds of data were collected using a standard ethnographic method of participant observation: computer messages, responses to interviews and a small survey I posted on-line. Altogether, and to date, about 150, 400k diskettes of e-mail messages have been collected. Interviews (25) and survey responses (30) were collected face to face, by telephone and on-line. Interview and survey procedures entered into an early (first year) cycle of analytical induction functioning as an initial incursion into the community. It turned out, however, that old-timer interviewees supplied me with invaluable insights; and significantly, that several survey respondents were from the silent (lurking) majority supplying me with an illuminating picture of this activity. In turn, this prompted me to post a small analysis of survey results on-line. Finally, as I worked my way into the community, I found more natural ways to build my experience and understanding: in personal communication; in the Permission for Citation

Process; and in the occurring on-line conversations[1].

5. Analyses

To make sense of the flow of on-line communication I combined notions from Soviet Activity theory (Engeström, 1988; Leonte'v, 1981; Wertsch, 1981) and a Conversation for Action discursive model of communication (Murray, 1991; Winograd and Flores, 1986). From Soviet Activity theory I borrowed the notions of activity system and the metaphor of the water molecule (Vygotsky in Moll, 1990) whose elements, hydrogen and oxygen, are seen as functionally irreducible to the whole (i.e.; hydrogen and oxygen separately function as combustors). Using these two notions I determined that viewed in its totality, the flow of on-line communication occurring on my computer screen was an activity system in its own right. This activity system, I called electronic academia. Looking for tasks and actions within that system I then differentiated tasks such as logging on and off invoked by tool usage from action realized in messaging such as requesting bibliographic information.

From Conversation for Action I borrowed two notions: the notion that speech acts cohere into recursive patterns of communication called conversations; and the notion that conversations travel across modes and media of communication. These two notions enabled me to look for relationship among messages and the utterances embodied within them both of which are constitutive, though irreducible to the activity system of electronic academia. Three such recurrent patterns of communication were identified: academic, administrative and community-building. Findings pertaining to community-building action are reported here.

6. Findings

6.1. Naming the community

The origins of the x-lists with its double meaning prefix "x" was perhaps a first order indicator of the desire to build and sustain community. Created in 1984, the lists had been set up to maintain communication among a small group of scholars (the "ex-scholars) who, for economic and other reasons, were dispersed and no longer working together at the research laboratory of the host site. Founded in this spirit list mem-

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[1]Voluntary consent was unsollicited as communication occurring on line was considered public. I announced my research intent on-line, however, in the posted survey; and conformed to the x-list protocol of solliciting citation permission for messages and making available all of the work that I wrote in connection with the x-lists, including survey responses stripped of headers to preserve anonymity.

bership had grown to the present 400 member community.

The name of the community and its double functioning prefix was picked creatively by list members who addressed each other in terms that played on this name and it dual significance. For example, members addressed each other in the following terms: "Hello X-class-ers.."; "Dear X-acting colleagues..."; "Dear ... and other X-Lister's"; "Hello X-classers"; "Dear exacters"; "Dear X-classiests"; "Dear Friends of the XFAMILY"; "Dear Xmain-ites"; "Dear Xcompers and Xclassers"; "Hello xpracticers"; "Hey ho out there in xpractice-land".

In this way the community was named and this name was re-formulated and appropriated creatively, to build community, in the acceptance and nurturance of this identity.

6.2. Civil language use
The language in use on the x-lists was warm and playful; grateful and positive. Expression of playfulness and warmth existed in friendly forms of address marking relations of solidarity in contrast to those of power (Brown and Gilman, 1960). Members addressed each other, signed off and referenced each other's work mostly on a first name basis. In sign-offs for example, the sequence -preferred name/ first+last name was often used, including short comments expressing such feelings as hesitation, congeniality, timidity and modesty, all of which may be seen as converging to mark dimensions of relational equality to build community. The following are examples of sign-offs

- mike as in MC
- Math is fun -Mary Ann
- *Sigh*, who said modern life was easy? :-(Edouard
- joe -Joszef A. Txx
- Existentially yours... Edouard
- I will stop myself here. Phew! :-) C.T.
- Nic -Nic Sxx
- Puzzled -Arne
- Robert (a perplexed and marginal participant in
- Russ -Russell A. Hxx
- Sigh- Margaret American society)
- Bertram (Chip) Bxx
- *Heavy sigh* :-(Edouard
- L*
- My two cents worth. Ilda C. Kxx

Civility also existed in a positive attitude with expressions of gratefulness and appreciation, including praise. The following are a few examples of this civility:

- Bravo Meghan...
- E-U-R-E-K-A! Now that observation is as perfect example of the nature of RE-mediation as anyone could hope
- This is a wonderful statement
- Gordon, thank you for the thoughtful and informed consideration of major themes in the 3 articles in Educational Researcher
- The recent postings by W. have been a great help for me in evaluating what sort of direction to follow working with elementary aged students. Thank you, everyone of you.
- Deborah, that was a fantastic summary of the Griffin and Cole article.
- To all of us. Thank us all for provoking interesting discussions. I don't regret spending a couple of hours reading and responding to messages during the week-end.

A civility marked by such spirit as sheer admiration, enthusiasm, support and appreciation for on-line activity.

7. Functions: Growth and Continuity
Community building action may be seen as functionally different from academic and administrative action, constitutive of the flow of on-line communication. Community-building conversations are intended to grow rather to exhaust or close themselves. This means that they function in a different time frame compared to the discrete and punctual frames of academic and administrative action. Community-building conversations are in essence continuous. They are geared towards creating cohesive ties in and of the group. Their locus is exclusive to the on-line space, even if they may be re-inforced by off-line ties and in turn lend themselves to the creation of off-line ties. Finally, it is in these conversations that intangibles are negotiated. Action is at the feeling and spiritiual levels: with feelings such as warmth, acceptance, validation, belonging and trust negotiated; and spirituality in the form of respect, tolerance and gratitude actively transacted.

8. Discussion: Why Community?
To explore the forms and functions of language use through which community is created and nurtured circumscribes the existence of community as phenomenon. This precludes the deeper issue of why such communities exist. Community-building conversations provide perhaps in essence what the psychological literature calls "ersatz": a compensation of sorts after the severance of both primary bonds (parents) and secondary bonds (teachers): a peer solidarity in the solitude of journeys. As one community member posted " I'm

raising all of this at length on X-list because it is precisely here that I have found a great deal of companionship in my heresy -- and damn little elsewhere". Far from the publish and perish drive of academic and administrative action, these conversations are nonetheless vital to productivity and conceptual change. For the degree to which they are successful in enabling communication is a vital condition of productivity, and in this particular case for the making and diffusion of knowledge. This is to say that where community is truly successful, the flow of on-line communication is both source and outlet for activity. In turn, the principle of community can be used to inform the design of telecommunications technology in different domains of professional activity (e.g.; for teachers as in the LabNet project -DiMauro and Jacobs, 1995).

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