

Virtual regulative discourse: moderator strategies in asynchronous online discussions in higher education.

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This paper takes as its starting point Bernstein's (2000) concepts of regulative and instructional discourses. Bernstein describes the role of instructional discourse to create 'specialized skills and their relationship to each other' and regulative discourse to create 'order, relations and identity' and manage 'attitudes, dispositions and performances'. These concepts from the sociology of education have been reinterpreted from within systemic functional linguistics to explore dual registers that function in the interaction of school classrooms (Christie 2002), such that an instructional register is projected through a regulatory one. This pilot study shifts the locus to higher education, and specifically to moderated and assessed asynchronous online discussions, which are becoming commonplace in tertiary settings in Australia. The focus is on the regulative register.

The pedagogical rationale for online discussions hinges on loosely applied Vygotskian theories of the collaborative construction of knowledge and on the concept of a community of learners, with 'moderation' and 'facilitation' replacing transmission and teaching, leading to a potentially more 'democratic' means of engagement between the 'teacher' and the 'taught'. Online discussions inhabit the boundary of the written and the spoken and of the academic and the social; they are not transitory, as classroom interaction is; indeed a permanent record of the interaction remains. In this context, is a regulative register evident? and if it is, what form does it take?

To answer these questions from a linguistic point of view, discussion threads taken from postgraduate online courses in three different disciplinary areas within Public Health were investigated using a multilayered approach, concentrating on discourse analysis informed by Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) but referring also to survey and observational data. Linguistic data were analysed using two systems within SFL – the systems of NEGOTIATION and APPRAISAL. This paper will describe the tools and methods of analysis and comment on their usefulness (and their limitations) for identifying and describing regulative discourse, as well as discussing some of the results of the analyses.

Exchange structure analysis is used to describe the negotiation of meaning in spoken language, distinguishing what is being negotiated: information (knowledge moves) or goods and services (action moves); whether the speaker is giving or demanding and whether a move initiates an exchange or responds to another speaker (Martin JR and Rose D 2007:223). In terms of SFL theory, this NEGOTIATION system is located in the interpersonal metafunction, hence is implicated in 'construing social relations of power and solidarity (tenor) in social context [Martin JR, Zappavinga M and Dwyer P: forthcoming) and therefore seems ideally suited to describing if, and how, regulative discourse is instantiated by moderators in this context.

Exchange structure (choices within the NEGOTIATION system) was used in the present study to describe the overall structure of the discussions, leading to a tentative curriculum genre description. In common with many other analyses of pedagogical discourse, it was necessary to employ Ventola's (1987) category of 'linguistic service', conflating action and knowledge moves, to account for much moderator 'talk'. The analysis enabled the identification of possible regulative moves and exchanges (these terms were used in preference to 'regulative register' for this discussion) and within them the extensive use of interpersonal metaphor, for example the avoidance of outright imperatives and substitution of non-congruent forms such as statements and questions, presumably to mitigate power differentials in this more 'democratic' form of pedagogy. The identification of primary and secondary knowers proved difficult in some cases, with implications for identifying task design and power relations, and this form of analysis does not seem to illuminate the long sequences of knowledge moves per 'speaker' which occurred in these threads. These might be more usefully analysed with reference to written genres, an example of the way boundaries are so often blurred in asynchronous online discussions.. While some of the regulative moves identified were no more than task instructions, others seemed to be positioning participants as online learners and public health professionals, in other words managing 'attitudes, dispositions and performances'.

The system of APPRAISAL in SFL is likewise situated in the interpersonal metafunction and refers to linguistic resources used to express the speaker's or writer's attitude towards both interlocutors and topic, and thereby to position listeners and readers. It includes affect (emotions such as happiness, inclination and satisfaction and their opposites), appreciation (of objects, ideas), judgment (of such things as truthfulness, propriety and capacity) and engagement (with others, present and absent, and their words and ideas).

This analysis showed that, although there was some variation between moderators, in most cases there was subtle interplay between affect, appreciation and judgment (as well as interpersonal metaphor) in regulative and evaluative moves, much of it setting the basic rules for contributing and underscoring the virtue of cooperative approaches. There were some instances of student participants initiating regulative and evaluative exchanges. This may lend some support to the concept of a more democratic medium, albeit one with a somewhat implicit, competence based and progressivist curriculum.

References

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