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A Critical Discourse Analysis of Students' Anonymous Online Postings

Dick Ng'ambi, University of Cape Town, South Africa

ABSTRACT

It is difficult to understand students' social practices from artifacts of anonymous online postings. The analysis of text genres and discursive types of online postings has potential for enhancing teaching and learning experiences of students. This article focuses on analysis of students' anonymous online postings using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The article argues that social practices reproduce during online interaction and artifacts embody such reproduction. A study involving more than 300 commerce students at a higher education institution (HEI) using a special purpose anonymous online consultation tool, the Dynamic Frequently Asked Questions (DFAQ), and social practices embodied in the artifacts is analyzed using CDA. The analysis used the three dimensions of CDA—description (text genres), interpretation (discursive type), and explanation (social practice)—and insights into students' social practices were inferred. The article concludes that CDA of anonymous postings provided insight into social practices of students and, in particular, highlighted the tension between perceptions of inflexibility of traditional teaching practices and student demands for flexible learning. Finally, CDA, as described in this article, could be useful in analyzing e-mail communications, short message service (SMS) interactions, Web blogs, and podcasts.

Keywords: anonymity; critical discourse analysis; DFAQ; online postings

INTRODUCTION

Although Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) has been used to provide social critique (Thompson, 2002; Willig, 1999), assist in developing appropriate social interventions (Willig, 1999), empower people (Panteli, 2003; Willig, 1999), and unravel “how language conspires to legitimate and perpetuate unequal power relations” (Willig, 1999), the potential of CDA for analyzing online artifacts has not been explored. The

strengths of CDA lie in making connections between social and cultural structures and processes on the one hand, and properties of text on the other (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997:277). Other text analysis approaches, such as Exchange Structure Analysis (Pilkington, 1999) and text mining (Ng'ambi, 2002), do not link text to social and cultural structures.

Fairclough (1992) contends that every discourse instance has three dimensions: it is

either spoken or written *text*; it is an *interaction* between people involving processes of producing and interpreting the text; or it is part of social *action*, and in some cases, virtually the whole of it. The activities on the right (see Figure 1) of the model represent the framework of analysis in which a piece of text is described, and then the discursive practices upon which it draws are identified and linked to the underlying power relations, which may be reproduced by the interaction (Thompson, 2004). The social interaction happens within the discursive practices, which produce text; through the analysis of text messages, evidence of social practices can be revealed or noted. Furthermore, the discursive practices are influenced by the situation or environment in which a participant is.

Atkins (2002) postulates three stages of understanding a discourse: (1) *social conditions of production and interpretation* (i.e., factors in society that led to the production of a text and how these factors affect interpretation); (2) the *process of production and interpretation of text* (i.e., how produced text affects interpretation); and (3) the product of the first two stages: the *text*.

The rest of the article is organized as follows: First a discourse theory is described, fol-

lowed by a discussion on the research approach and analytical framework used. The case study is then discussed and an analysis of results explained. Finally, a conclusion is given.

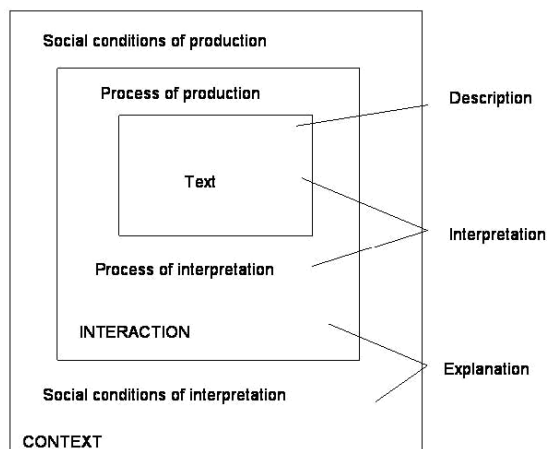
DISCOURSE THEORY

CDA provides a way of thinking that analyzing text and discourse practices may give access to social identities and social relations. Phillips and Jorgensen (2002) observe:

[D]iscourse practices—through which texts are produced (created) and consumed (received and interpreted)—are viewed as an important form of social practice which contributes to the constitution of the social world including social identities and social relations. (p. 61)

The production of text draws its meanings from the social practice and *vice versa*. The discourse theory states that every word spoken draws its meaning from the social practices of which it is a part, or, recursively, from the sediment of prior practices (Burbules & Bruce, 2001). I infer from the discourse theory that the process of production and interpretation of online artifacts is not free from the social conditions of production and the social con-

Figure 1. Discourse as text, interaction and context (Fairclough, 1989)



ditions of interpreting such text. Fairclough (1989) points out that discourse involves social conditions of production and social conditions of interpretation. Fairclough (1992) observes that the relationship between social action and text is understood in a context of interaction. It stands to reason that interaction is a product of social action, and the *traces* of its interactive processes left on the human mind reproduce social practices (interaction).

RESEARCH APPROACH

In this section, a research process is described in terms of how communicative actions were set up, initiated, and controlled. It describes the notion of communication genres, scope of interactive audience, and the anonymous tool that mediated interaction.

Planning

Planning a communicative event involves making decisions about the meeting time, venue, agenda, and so forth, and inviting participants to attend. A communicative event also can occur when a subject takes the initiative rather than wait for an invitation. Van Dijk (1996) gives two examples: a patient taking an initiative to talk to a doctor, and a student asking to talk to a professor. In either case, the doctor or the professor usually would decide about the setting. My view is that consciousness of powerful actors constrains interactions as it takes the focus away from the content of communication to the source of content. In this study, I was concerned with recursive social life in which a patient consults with a doctor, where the patient is also a doctor; a student consults an "expert," where a student is also an "expert." Such communication events do not need planning, and they are socially located. Students posted questions as need arose and were free to respond to any question. The study was located in an authentic context.

Setting

Setting up a communicative event involves deciding who controls the interaction. As Van Dijk (1996) put it, "Who is allowed or obliged to participate, and in what role, may be de-

cided by the chairperson or by other powerful participants who control the interaction" (p. 87). Van Dijk gives an example of the effect of positioning and the presence of props of power, such as the robes of a judge and the uniform of a police officer. My addition to Van Dijk's rationalization is that positioning and power are often unspoken or unwritten. Human actions are a product of consciousness of these unspoken or unwritten conditions. Mindful of the power and effect of powerful actors in a communication event, online interaction may enable or inhibit interactivity.

Controlling Communicative Events

The power to regulate communicative events, as Van Dijk (1996) observes:

consists of various dimensions of speech and talk; which mode of communication may/must be used; which language may/must be used by whom; which genres of discourse are allowed; which types of speech acts; or who may begin or interrupt turns at talk or discursive sequences. (p. 88)

Van Dijk gives an example of defendants in court who may be required to speak the standard language, to answer questions only (and only when required to speak), to speak only about the topic being discussed, and to use a polite deferential style. In this study, there was no regulations of communicative events except to post a question or respond to one.

Communication Genres

Paivarinta (2001) stresses, "A communication genre should be distinguished from the medium of communication; for instance, a fax or e-mail are not good examples of communication genres, whereas a hotel reservation or an invitation to a meeting, which can be mediated by fax or electronic mail, are" (p. 213). When someone mentions the word *e-mail*, they may be referring to e-mail as a medium of communication or e-mail as a message. It is because of this ambiguity that Paivarinta (2001) argues

that e-mail was not a good example of communication genre.

Scope and Audience Access

As Van Dijk (1996) observes, "When speakers are able to influence the mental models, knowledge, attitudes and eventually the ideologies of recipients, they may indirectly control their future actions" (p. 89). The influence on a student's mental model is in two ways: (a) exposure to other students' questions and responses, or (b) interpreting a response to a posted question. Access to a deluge of questions from other students mirrors understanding of a class to an individual and hence indirectly affects their questioning behavior.

Anonymous Online Tool

The Dynamic Frequently Asked Questions (DFAQ) tool was designed and developed at the UCT as a special purpose question and consultation environment for students (Ng'ambi, 2003, 2004; Ng'ambi & Hardman, 2004). DFAQ provided a medium through which students consulted one another and the lecturer anonymously (Ng'ambi, 2003). Used as an educative, social, and communicative space, DFAQ dynamically created a knowledge resource from student consultations. DFAQ was available 24/7. Designed with a seamless Web/Short Messages Services interface, students had an anywhere-anytime anonymous consultation space. Time, place, and content of messages were self-regulatory and controlled by students.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The data analysis is carried on artifacts (text messages) from an anonymous knowledge-sharing environment using CDA, where certain generic specific genres and discursive types (Roode, Speight, Pollock & Webber, 2004) are identified by examining issues of power and domination. There is a subjective judgment when identifying these text genres and discursive types (see Table 1) and applying them to sections of text (Roode et al., 2004).

In the context of this study, **neutrality discursive** type refers to discourses that are not tak-

ing sides on a topic of discussion. **Corporatism discursive** type refers to discourses that imply collaboration; **technological optimism** refers to discourses that acknowledge the technology's potentials. The **pragmatism discursive** type refers to discourse addressing practical issues. **Legitimacy discourse** discursive type refers to authoritative discourse, and technocracy discursive type refers to technocratic discourse. The text genres and discursive types are outcomes of the process of production and interpretation of text (see Figure 1). It follows that an iterative analysis (moving from text to social action) of CDA (i.e., Description, Interpretation, and Explanation) would help unravel social practices embodied in text.

Description

Text is an outcome of an online interaction. Text is both a medium and an outcome of mental constructs (intentions). Thus, an author transforms intentionality into ostensive text messages. The reader of text interprets (attempts to deconstruct the author's intentions) the message and responds through another text (the cycle repeats). Thus, the focus of the description phase is to help identify text genres.

Interpretation

While the description component focuses on text genre, interpretation focuses on understanding the production and interpretation process of text. Given that text is an outcome of an

Table 1. Text genres and discursive types (adapted from Roode et al., 2004)

Text Genre (TG)	Discursive Type (DT)
Confidence	Neutrality
Factual Information	Corporation
Humor	Technological optimism
Persuasion	Pragmatism
Uncertainty	Legitimacy
	Technocracy

online interaction, the interpretation component involves an analysis of discursive types embodied in text.

Explanation

The interpretation component connects interpretation (discursive types) and description (text genres). The explanation component links interaction to the social action (practices) or the modalities drawn upon during interaction. It is through the explanation that social practices are unraveled.

CASE STUDY

The study was conducted at a medium-sized contact University in South Africa. More than 300 final year students registered for a degree in the Commerce Faculty participated in the study. The DFAQ tool was introduced to the students at the beginning of the semester in a six-month course. Most participants were full-time resident students. The class was well represented in terms of female and male students. For most of these participants, prior schooling did not prepare them for the critical demand of university courses, and although they were in their final year, the pressure of academic life was still a challenge. The objective of DFAQ was to provide an environment in which students would help one another, and the result of the interaction was a knowledge resource created by students for students with a subsidiary feedback benefit to faculty staff.

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

In this section, **unedited text** posted by students in the DFAQ is analyzed. For the sake of brevity, one posting [see Question 167] is analyzed. The posting attracted 16 responses (five are analyzed in this section). The question had 130 hits (43% of the class read it) in two days. The analytical framework (see Table 1) is used to analyze both the posting and the responses.

Text 1

[Question 167]: I have a general concern with the incredibly high volume of work that we are required to cover for the upcoming test. I know students always say this, however, i do not at all find it fair that we be expected to cover, literally 250 pages, some of us in a single night. All that ends up happening is students receiving low marks, not because of lack of knowledge of the content or whatever else, but simply because the volume is too large to cover and make adequate sense. I for one have a problem with this upcoming test, as i am also a xyz 1009 student, have just written a test, have other equally demanding course to consider and yet am still expected to go home, get thru the 250 pages in time for the test tomorrow and get great marks! Please do something about this, even if it means breaking tests up so we have more class tests, thus less volumes to study for per test. Thanks and sorry to moan like this.

The following comment was posted by a peer (a classmate).

Text 2

[167-315]: I had the xyz in class assesment for monday, which I could not study for as I wrote a law test the next day which I needed better marks for, and then i now have 1 day to look through 250 pages of work for tomorrows test. I have decided to leave out 2 chapters for tomorrows test- If John (not his real name) tests us on chapters 1, or 5 then i will fail miserably, so here goes to spotting! but I completely agree with you!

The following posting was from a lecturer.

Text 3

[167-317]: The test timetables have been posted since the beginning of this semester/July. We make the information available to you in advance so that you will manage your time in a responsible manner.

Analysis 1.

Description (Text Analysis)	Interpretation (Discursive Type)	Explanation (Social Practice)
<p>Panic (New TG) – the student is panicking because s/he has not studied for the test, and there is no time to understand the material.</p> <p>Factual Information – is used such as 250 pages of a book, reference to a test just written in another course.</p> <p>Persuasion – takes a form of an appeal to the lecturer to do something.</p> <p>Uncertainty – is not sure what the options are for the lecturer but proceeds to suggest having many tests.</p> <p>Apologetic (new TG) – is mindful that students always complain and that this is not one of such. Ends with an apology that s/he has “moaned.”</p>	<p>Pragmatism => student is addressing practical issues: (i) volume of material to be covered before the test, (ii) lack of time to study, (iii) suggestion to break test into several tests.</p> <p>Legitimacy => the student authoritatively demands that something be done about her/his complaint.</p> <p>Corporatism => willing to accept alternatives if only test does not happen.</p>	<p>Generalizes that students do always complain but that this complaint is individualist and hence different.</p> <p>Refers to a test just written (xyz 1009) “...I for one...” as though the test in question was not written by other students, and uses the phrase “I have other equally demanding course,” as if it’s the only student who takes these other courses.</p> <p>Argues that despite this being an individualized complaint, failure to be listened to may lead many students to getting poor marks.</p>

Analysis 2.

Description (Text Analysis)	Interpretation (Discursive Type)	Explanation (Social Practice)
<p>Humor – it’s not that this student would enjoy failing miserably, but s/he has taken a humorous approach.</p> <p>Factual information – the student is honest in disclosing that the reason why s/he has no time to study for the test is because energies were directed at another course.</p> <p>Persuasion – there is a gentle persuasion to go and study what you can and write the test.</p>	<p>Neutrality => rather than openly disagreeing with the posting and directly advising the fellow student, the student shares what s/he is going to do about it.</p> <p>Pragmatism => the idea of leaving out two chapters is a practical solution, and hence pragmatic.</p>	<p>According to the statement, students receiving low marks is attributed to study strategies used. The student did not study for a class assignment in one course because s/he needed to focus on a test in another course. A student has disclosed her/his academic survival strategy.</p>

¹ The number of times a posting was visited or opened to be read

Analysis 3.

Description (Text Analysis)	Interpretation (Discursive Type)	Explanation (Social Practice)
<p>Factual information – test timetables published at the beginning of the semester showed when tests would be taken.</p>	<p>Legitimacy – reference is made to the test timetables with which students are provided at the beginning of the semester. Adds that there is no excuse for studying for the test the night before.</p>	<p>The statements used the plural “we,” suggesting a community of academics. And it seems to address all students—“so that you”—and not necessarily the author of the posting. It suggests that in posting test timetables in advance, faculty is blameless.</p>

The following was a comment to the lecturer's comment:

Text 4

[167-318]: *I agree that there has been ample time to prepare. However, a lack of available textbooks has contributed to the inability of students to be prepared on time. Moreover, this has added to a general feeling of apathy which I have picked up from various students. Sad but true.*

The following statement is presumably from the student who asked the first question:

Text 5

[167-326]: *I totally agree with the last post. There's no point in stating that we've had since the beginning of semester, basically to prep for this test, that's just a (no offence) thick comment. Firstly, how do you study for this test from the beginning of semester when you haven't even been taught the stuff and secondly, some of has really do have other courses (try 3 other rather*

demanding courses) to think about. I wanna get out of this varsity come year end and all im saying is that giving students 250 pages to have to get through in less than 24 hours is asking them to basically fail the course, thus actually not graduate. It's not about time management anymore, there just aren't enough hours in a day to get through it all, sorry.

The last posting was an interesting one from another student:

Text 6

[167-333]: *There's something very different with this semester's DFAQ... all people are doing is complaining! we are at ABC - one of the top universities in africa - and we're in third year, which means that we are expected to know how to deal with stress and deadlines. if you guys are struggling so much, then drop out, or something! the work really isn't that difficult, and it's really not that much. by the way, i also wrote xyz 1009s yesterday, as well as the in-class assessment on monday, and i am still prepared for today's test*

Analysis 4.

Description (Text Analysis)	Interpretation (Discursive Type)	Explanation (Social Practice)
<p>Confidence – the response gives an impression of resolve.</p> <p>Factual information – assuming the textbooks did not arrive in time, the student draws upon a fact that ought to be addressed.</p>	<p>Pragmatism => to refer to a textbook is to address a practical problem.</p>	<p>According to the posting, the community of students has not been able to prepare for the test on time because of the textbook problem.</p>

Analysis 5.

Description (Text Analysis)	Interpretation (Discursive Type)	Explanation (Social Practice)
<p>Persuasion – the student seeks to dismiss the fact that test timetable was published at the beginning of the semester, questioning the logic of such reasoning.</p>	<p>Pragmatism => refers to three other courses as demanding and concedes that there was no way to pass the test.</p>	<p>The student refers to self as having a single purpose of graduating at the end of that year but draws a community of students in the argument—“giving students...asking them...not graduate.”</p>

- a little thing called time management. come on, people - stop complaining and manage your time! good luck for the test.

CONCLUSION

In this article, CDA was used to analyze anonymous student postings in an online environment. The article has shown how the text genres and discursive types serve as a vehicle for social critique. Two new text genres were observed: *panic* and *apologetic*. The article concludes as follows:

- Understanding the conditions of production and interpretation of online text provided insight into social practices of a community in which students were located. New text genres may emerge as conditions of production and interpretation change.
- Results of CDA would provide effective input in designing and developing interventions that affect communities of students.
- Use of CDA on anonymous online artifacts provided a way of understanding assumptions enshrined in the traditional practices (inflexibility) of institutions and the practicality as experienced by students (quest for flexible learning).

As mentioned in literature, identification of text genre and discursive types in CDA requires a subjective judgment. Thus, familiarity with the analytical instrument is required to get useful results. The application of CDA could be useful in the following: (i) analysis of e-mail correspondence; (ii) Short Message Services interaction; and (iii) analysis of Weblogs and podcasts.

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Analysis 6.

Description (Text Analysis)	Interpretation (Discursive Type)	Explanation (Social Practice)
<p>Confidences - points out that s/he does the same courses, same time, but has done the assignment and is ready for the test that others are complaining about.</p> <p>Persuasion – s/he persuades peers to stop complaining and start preparing for the test instead.</p> <p>Humor – the wishing of “good luck” to friends who are not ready for the test was meant to be humorous.</p>	<p>Technological optimism => refers to the posting in the online anonymous consultation tool (DFAQ) which students used for this engagement as having had many complaints that semester.</p> <p>Legitimacy => attempts to calm the complainants to accept that it is never easy at a university.</p>	<p>Students’ expectations of educational use of DFAQ differed from how fellow students used it (i.e., as a complaining space). The student calls on the community of students to “stop complaining and manage their time.” The student accepts workload as part of university life and encourages fellow students to start working rather than complaining.</p>

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