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Assignment Two:

'The Landscape of Intervention: An Experience in Online Learning'

Anaheim Online University: Edu550

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Sunday, 17 May 2009

Word Count: 2734

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Introduction

Classrooms (both off and online) are complex systems (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008).

A dynamic systems approach to analyzing the interaction and events that make up a classroom can be visualized as three dimensional landscapes with hills—unstable moments in discourse but potentially creative and original bursts of communication—valleys—stable and reliable streams of discourse but potentially stagnant 'pools' of communication... and all morphologies in-between.

Time is the fourth dimension and this can be considered the 'trajectory' or path of the interaction, the discourse and the course, all of a whole united, moving across each of the landscapes of the moment, the lesson, the course of study and beyond. Each interaction is moving across a dynamic landscape, the participants navigate through the system's highs and lows, the hills and valleys, the creative and stagnant moments, according to their relationships to each other, the environment, the material they are exploring together and according to other, perhaps more subtle possible relationships (the participants themselves in relation to their goals and dreams, for example).

'Intervention' as an event described in this paper is first of all simply an action between events.

Paraphrasing Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008: 11) it is an action that can potentially be *adapted to* (by the participants) as a means of re-organizing a stagnant or static environment. For the sake of disambiguation, compare the notion of intervention in the Vygotskian sense: 'The ZPD was created as a context in which careful intervention would stimulate internalization...' (van Lier 2000: 255).

This paper explores two segments of time in an online master's course for English teachers in a distance learning program. The interaction in each segment of the lesson in the context of the course is perceived as two attempts at an 'intervention' initiated by the professor; an intervention that eventually pushed the trajectory of the discourse (and consequently the course itself) in a new and potentially beneficial direction... But let's begin at the beginning...

The Retrospective Participant Observer Paradigm

Whereas a 'complete participant' with a prescriptive observational plan is covert and a conventional 'participant observer' is overt to the other participants (Fraenkel and Wallen 1993) a 'retrospective' participant observer is positioned more flexibly than either in that no action is analyzed until the participant decides a relevant or significant event has taken place; in fact, there may be no analysis at all unless the participant decides to document the experience. This is to say anyone participating in anything is a potential retrospective participant observer and any analysis and/or description of events always comes after the fact in this paradigm (see Appendix Two).

This paper introduces the 'retrospective' participant observer as a valid means of achieving qualitative data in online distance learning programs. The segments of classroom interaction described as events were identified after the fact and their significance was analyzed retrospectively; there was no prescriptive task nor a particular discrete subject set apart to observe.

Outline of an Online Experience

This experience occurred in an eight week online course: Classroom Management and Observation.

This course was a requirement in an MA distance learning program. There were eight students (of various backgrounds) and one professor participating in discussion forums (eight separate text-based units of a week's duration) and chats (eight one-hour text-based sessions at weekly intervals).

A) Initial Conditions

Initial conditions or how events are 'set-up' in terms of participant relationships and activity—and how events are likely (but not certain) to transpire—are conditions that 'form the system's landscape and influence the trajectory of the system as it changes' (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008: 230).

Online learning is unique in that no physical environments are shared by its participants. Initial conditions are necessarily subjective in this context: they are inevitably how we conceived them to be. Further, they become initial states when we turn back the hands of time and take notice of conditions retrospectively. We could describe it as sinking a tripod into the earth of a particular landscape at a particular time and surveying the course of events through the recorded dialog and interaction of the participants. It follows then that the two initial conditions reported here will be impressionistic in nature: the first reflects my impressions at the outset of the course, and the second records the thoughts, feelings and ideas that occurred while participating in two segments of a live online text-based chat session in the sixth week of the course.

B) Timescales: Course, Discussion and Chat

Three timescales must be distinguished: course (about two months in duration) discussion (at roughly weekly intervals) and chats (consisting of about one hour per week). They will not be considered discretely, rather, presented as dynamic and 'conflated' (Kramsch 2008:662-664). So, for

example, what is typed in the interaction of a chat session may refer to a weekly discussion post or even to the course as a whole (e.g., concern about a final grade). In order to avoid becoming unnecessarily complex, participant status (in text-based discussions and chats) will be seen on the same level (as equal members in the same socio-academic sphere) through all timescales.

Referring to Hofstadter (2007) Kramsch expresses the notion of 'embodied time': 'Our memories are not in the past but live on as present realities in our bodies to be both experienced and observed' (2008:659). Participants, in the work of collaborating and of constructing dialogue, are constantly referring to other timescales, both in the past and projected into the 'future'... perhaps as a dance of both real and imagined possibilities. The 'chat dialogue' in this paper will be considered in this light.

C) Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

Cummings (2004) presents a range of tools and opportunities CMC offers participants in an online learning experience. This paper focuses on three of them:

- 1) CMC is 'an enabling and empowering tool that combines expression, interaction, reflection, problem-solving, critical thinking, and collaboration (Egbert and Hanson-Smith; Chapelle).'
- 2) 'CMC is interactive, promoting dialogue (Warschauer "Computer-Mediated") while at the same time encouraging more complex language than face-to-face communication (Matsuda, et al).'
- 3) 'CMC, accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, increases opportunities for communication (Warschauer "Computer-Mediated"; Gonglewski, Meloni, and Brant).'

As Cummings (2004) points out (via Nunan 1999) online courses run optimally when the students are given equal and ample opportunities to express themselves and when the professor/facilitator responds to needs in an appropriate and timely fashion. As we will see later in this paper, responding

to student needs may require an awareness of lesson activity across all timescales while surveying the 'landscape' of events that the course had hitherto taken and to which it may potentially traverse.

D) Motivational Factors

Motivation is a vast topic, so focus is required to fit the appropriate aspect of motivation to the context of the language segments presented here: 'During the lengthy process of mastering certain subject matters, motivation does not remain constant, but is associated with the dynamically changing and evolving mental process...' (Dörnyei and Skehan 2005: 8).

As relationships of learners to each other and to course material in the online learning context evolve week after week, intellectual ideas and opinions become heavy on the scales of social interaction... it seems, especially online, people long for more personal relations, something that balances out the heaviness of academia... something other than the analysis of concepts and theories, the 'monotony of words, words, words' (segment two: 05 and 07). This 'crisis of motivation' can be described metaphorically as a 'fixed point attractor' (Larsen-Freeman and Cameron 2008: 176) or more dramatically, perhaps in the worst case scenario, as a dead end situation.

E) Language Segments

The language segment as a unit of analysis for this paper is based on the belief that 'language use is a property of discourse and not of the individual' (ibid.: 174). This concept places language both in the social and cognitive domains. Further, '[e]ach occasion of language using behavior is dependent on the specific discourse environment, and conversely, each discourse event is unique' (ibid.: 175).

The obvious caveat is to avoid taking language segments 'out of context' in a conscious or 'unconscious' attempt to use them with specific ends in mind. To some extent this possibility will

always remain a problem. As a 'counter agent' to this form of manipulation, a reflection on the language events presented here as an ethnographic narrative (below) will attempt to gravitate toward returning the context to its place in the dialogic flow of relevant discourse; that is, the segments presented here will be visualized as nested aspects within the chat/discussion/course timescales and further into field/discipline and history as an element of one general and continuous human dialogue.

F) Affordances

Van Lier (2004: 91) describes affordances in general as 'what is available to the person to do something with'. For example, for most people, the millions of photos in Google Images may not afford any inherent value; on the other hand, while communicating online, an appropriate image uploaded to a text-based discussion post or even in a chat session may afford a valuable form of expression to its user. The photo in this case is an affordance, a resource that's available to the user to 'do something with', that is, to express a thought, idea or emotion—hopefully, but not necessarily, in a positive or beneficial fashion—and the participant presents it intentionally, as an extension of dialogue, not unlike a gesture in many ways.

If we wish to explore affordances in more detail, a distinction must be made between an actual and a perceived affordance (Norman 2009). The discussion forum user (just mentioned) perceives that photos may be an excellent means for expression in text-based environments but doesn't yet perceive audio and video affordances for this same purpose. In this way, the store of actual affordances become perceived affordances only after they have been examined and understood.

The Landscape of Intervention: an Ethnographic Narrative

Wajnryb (1992:116) states: 'The initial planning concerning a lesson's timing, combined with spontaneous decision-making in the course of the lesson, add up to what we call a lesson's pace.'

As Nunan phrases it: 'Pacing is an elusive thing, which probably explains why intuition is so important in making decisions in this area' (1996: 105).

I would add that pacing must be considered across timescales—chat, discussion and course in this case—and that there may be a moment or a point in a lesson that requires 'decision-making' (spontaneous or otherwise) as an intuitive move that alters the current state of affairs for the benefit of the class and its participants as a whole. This is considered an intervention.

The intervention I wish to describe here was initiated in the week six chat session by the professor, in the context mentioned in the previous section (see Appendix One for the transcripts):

The initial conditions, the way I was relating to the course at the outset was one of excitement. This was my seventh online course in the program and there were six new students (their first course) and a new professor (new to this university/program). At the same time, my enthusiasm was guarded, as I thought the course materials were somewhat outdated. Overall though, I was moving into the course with an open mind. My attitude regarding this timescale (eight weeks in duration) remained somewhat in tact (open-minded but with guarded enthusiasm) throughout the course and served as a background for events of shorter duration.

In contrast, the initial conditions of the week six chat (the conditions this paper is based on) seemed somewhat lethargic in terms of group interaction and motivation. Admittedly, a number of variables 'at play' were likely responsible for this state of affairs, but precipitating factors are not to be explored here. The point of focus is that 'text fatigue' or the 'monotony of words' as the professor named it (segment two: 05 and 07) was flattening the landscape of activity in the weekly discussion forum and in turn jeopardizing the trajectory of the course as a whole. There was some mention in

the posts regarding face-to-face versus online learning. My impression was that the text-based interaction in discussions and chats was coming up short, was proving inadequate, was not meeting student expectation in terms of how they perceived 'real' communication as unfolding: a face to face experience that is both personal and fulfilling. In my mind, the conditions at the outset of the week six chat session were at a low point, the pace of interaction was slowing down.

In segment one (appendix one) the professor mentions another course she was teaching at the time and how using 'links to audio and video files (that) help the students' (from segment one: 01-09). She followed this up with what I considered a first attempt at an intervention: 'which reminds me that I really want to discuss how we could make our class livelier with more audio and video...' (from segment one: 09-12).

My immediate thought was, 'Oh no, what's next?' Images of students with their families and pets on vacation and other such personal media flooded my mind, carrying with them feelings of defeat and resignation (yes, I *would* give in to it). I've never been a fan of family photo albums. Perhaps as a reaction to these images, thoughts about CMC—that it allows for complex ideas and concepts to be explored through careful, continuing discourse—positioned themselves, as thoughts often do, in tentative defiance. I was 'used to' the online experience and enjoyed the intellectual encounters.

The chat session progressed. The topic was 'realia' and it went on for some twenty minutes. I was at odds with the discussion: I used no realia as all my classrooms were equipped with computers and screens and I had long since given up on toting around a basket of objects as pedagogical tools. I more or less 'waited in the wings' taking sips of my room temperature coffee.

It was just after this segment of the chat session that (what I considered) the second attempt at an intervention took place: 'Now what I'm wondering is how much of the nonverbal we could incorporate into our interactions. For example...we had some lovely pie charts this week... what else could we do to break up the monotony of words, words, words? anyone?' (segment two: 01-07).

I was beginning to put things together now (as I'm a slow, but steady thinker). Not everyone in the class was satisfied with a barrage of intellectual collaboration week after week. I got the idea that the professor was hoping to introduce media in order to allow more opportunities for expression during the week-long discussions, to activate some of the latent affordances that online communication offers. These electronic resources, these potential audio and visual affordances were there, they just weren't yet perceived as being possible. My mind was set to change. I could feel the initial response to the professor's suggestion taking hold among the group: 'We could all post Youtube videos! ha!', 'Attach pictures...', 'videos...', 'Voice recordings...', 'pictures, photos and anecdotes.' were some of the responses (segment two: 12-22).

The landscape was changing, new hills and valleys were emerging. We were standing at the top of a hill and the view, the outlook for the remaining weeks of the course was, once again, filled with new possibilities... After it all had 'sunk in', I, the slow thinker, was ready to join in the fun.

Conclusion

I believe we can see this pedagogical intervention as a paradigm that offers teachers a glimpse into the intuitive nature of the proper use of timing and change in any classroom environment (be it off or online). The introduction of media in the discussion forum in the following weeks was a positive experience for the group as a whole (and there were many reports of this, but that's another story...).

The professor in this case had the ability to survey student needs across the timescales of chat/discussion/course, to see CMC as something more than an intellectual adventure, to realize the changing and evolving nature of motivation and to provide affordances that had potential for new ways of engaging (and becoming engaged) in the online experience.

Intervention, as a beneficial action between events, requires an intuitive form of intelligence. It is there if we wish to seek it out, to bring it forth and cultivate, as we cultivate learner potential in the classroom and in learning... that holistic and collaborative meaning-making process.

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Appendix One: Segments from an Online Chat Lesson

Segment One:

- 01)18:12 P: For example, this semester we are doing ...
- 02)18:12 P: a reading and writing course using...
- 03)18:12 P: The *****. Have you all read...
- 04)18:13 P: this wonderful book? And it's very difficult for the ...
- 05)18:13 S1: (Forgive me, (S3).)
- 06)18:13 P: students so I have a lot of links to audio and ...
- 07)18:13 S1: N, I haven't//
- 08)18:13 S2: (I have not read it)
- 09)18:13 P: video files that help the students...which reminds...
- 10)18:13 S3: (No apologies required, (S1), just wanted to pop that in there.)//

- 11)18:13 P: me that I really want to discuss how we could make...
12)18:14 P: our class livelier with more audio and video...

Segment Two:

- 01)18:40 P: for example. Now what I'm wondering...
02)18:40 P: is how much of the nonverbal we could...
03)18:40 P: incorporate into our interactions. For example...
04)18:40 P: we had some lovely pie charts this week....
05)18:41 P: what else could we do to break up the monotony...
06)18:41 S3: (blushing emoji)//
07)18:41 P: of words, words, words? anyone?//
08)18:41 S2: (haha, yes lovely pie charts)
09)18:41 S4 has just entered this chat
10)18:41 S1: Online or in a classroom, Prof?//
11)18:42 P: (S1), online. Us. Now.//
12)18:42 S5: We could all post Youtube videos! ha!//
13)18:42 S1: Attach pictures...
14)18:42 S6: (tough question...)//
15)18:42 S1: videos...
16)18:42 S3: (More smileys and emojis?)//
17)18:42 P: (S5), great idea. Really. in response to the questions///
18)18:42 S1: Voice recordings...
19)18:43 S7: emotions!
20)18:43 S8: pictures, photos and anecdotes./
21)18:43 S7: can't spell
22)18:43 P: Emoticons don't do it for me//

Appendix Two: Retrospective Participant Observer in Detail

Now that online learning is well on its way to becoming a mainstream form of education, the participant observer paradigm may be coming of age, growing up as it were, becoming a legitimate means for analyzing and describing possible online experiences.

In online communication, a participant is always a potential participant observer in that events are automatically and accurately recorded by the electronic medium in chats or discussions... what transpires is public (at least to the participants) and what is communicated is 'on the record'.

Whereas a 'complete participant' with a prescriptive observational plan is covert and a conventional 'participant observer' is overt to the other participants (Fraenkel and Wallen 1993) a 'retrospective' participant observer is positioned more flexibly than either in that no action is analyzed until the participant decides a relevant or significant event has taken place; in fact, there may be no analysis at all unless the participant decides to document the experience. Be that as it may, there is usually at least one episode/event/segment of discourse in any given dynamic human activity (online classrooms, in this case) that presents itself as worthy of further examination.

This is to say anyone participating in anything is a potential retrospective participant observer and any analysis and/or description of events always comes after the fact, that is, if they've been recorded.

The *observer's paradox* (Labov 1972) or the potential influence an observer has on the manner in which events unfold, is a non-issue in retrospective participant observation simply because the event wouldn't be determined until after the fact. The course of events cannot be directly influenced if there is no intentional observation ensuing, therefore 'natural' interaction can be expected.

Once an event is considered worthy of examination however, it can be considered a system worthy of analysis. In this paper, it is essentially a complex system. According to Agar in Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008: 242) ethnography is itself a complex system:

'(it) will lead you to ways of learning and documenting that you had no idea existed when you first started the study. You will learn how to ask the right question of the right people in the right way using knowledge you didn't know existed.'

The point Agar is making here is quite profound. By being aware of interaction as a *potential* ethnographic subject, participants may become further engaged and approach their subject matter with greater interest and intensity. This phenomenon is not the self-conscious affliction of an observer's paradox, rather an inspiration for whole-hearted engagement in the learning process.

From a complex systems perspective (as in this paper) an ethnographer cannot attain 'total objectivity—a view of matters apart from who he or she is...' (ibid.: 243). Larsen-Freeman and Cameron go on to say (referring to Agar once again): 'A complex system is dependent on its initial conditions, and this includes the researcher. Accounts of the 'same' phenomenon will differ when produced by different ethnographers (ibid.: 243).

Appendix Three: Further Research

Of course, in the end, this type of research is internally valid only to the extent that the electronic record can claim it to be (Nunan and Bailey 2009: 203). An event in retrospective participant observation (RPO) is not a static thing, it is an evolving perspective and, as such, is presented for further scrutiny. The outcomes of research are kindling for further questions and further research.

This process may be compared to taking a hike in the forest (or department store) with an automatic recording device, an eye in the sky as it were, taking in the environment and participating naturally in the experience. After all has been said and done, you may wish to access the archives and present this experience to someone as an 'ethnographic narrative', that is, an account of 'the actual language used by the participants and the social climate...' along with your own '... authorial comments that are woven into the narrative itself' (ibid.: 263) or you may simply store the data of your research for potential future use... or leave it to history... as a forgotten segment of time...