Making Big Room for Small Talk

(or...Ludic is the New Phatic)

Computers and Writing 2014

Suzanne Blum Malley
Columbia College Chicago
sbmalley@colum.edu

In the context of "Evolutions and Convolutions in Peer-to-Peer Online Interaction" I am going to very briefly share results of research that I have been engaged in on student writing in the text-based discussion boards of a large-scale, global, internet-mediated learning environment (IMLE). There are several things that we can call these online classroom spaces depending on their purpose, structure, and scale (e.g. GNLE's, CMC's, tellecolaboration, even, as Kaitlin and Susan will discuss in just a bit, MOOCs), but I'm going to stick with IMLE, interspersed with "online classroom," as umbrella terms today as I explore the what our students do and might need to do with their relational and transactional writing in those spaces.

How is Socializing (and Writing) in an IMLE Different from What We Typically Do?

Face-to-face classrooms

Other online "communities"

Social Networks

paralinguistic cues / shared something

While all online spaces that are or hope to be "communities" depend on discursive aspects of community building, the online (digital, networked) classroom has its own peculiarities because, typically, students are only in such a learning space because they are enrolled in a course.

In most non-teaching online "communities" and conversations, participants join a conversation because they want to; they have a shared interest, a shared problem, a shared goal, or, perhaps, just a real beef with one of those things or the group itself.

In the online classroom space, like in a face-to-face classrooms, participants only share the course, which may or may not be sufficient grounds for creating a rich social and learning environment. The stakes are higher for the online classroom, however, because writing to one another offers the ONLY means of creating social and learning interaction. We cannot stare our students down or cajole them until they speak in an online space; there is no uncomfortable silence for standard small talk or teacher talk to fill. The "small talk" of the online classroom requires distinct rhetorical strategies, or different moves to open and sustain channels of communication. Today, I hope to share with you insights from my research into how student writing constitutes those moves and how, very briefly, those moves, then, serve to lay the groundwork for the types of peer-to-peer writing, that is writing-to-learn and learning-to-write, that all teachers of writing typically hope for when designing their courses.
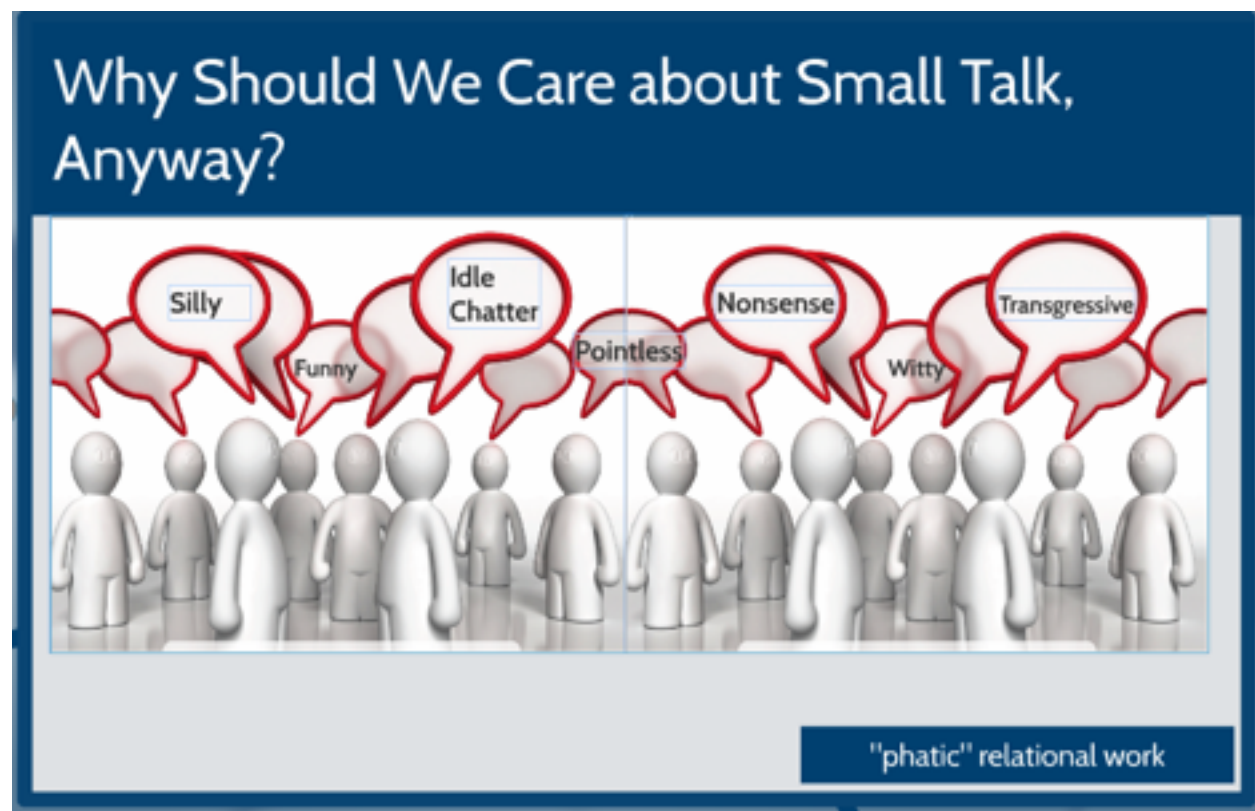
We regularly dismiss, or simply miss the value of, small talk in face-to-face communication. Sociolinguist Justine Coupland notes the difficult position of small talk when it comes to the serious business of other discourse:

It is the overshadowed antithesis of "real," "full," "serious," "useful," or "powerful" talk. Real talk is talk that "gets stuff done," where "stuff" does not include "relational stuff." With this ideology, sociality is marginalized as a "small" concern, and language for transacting business and other commercial or institutional instrumentalities is foregrounded. ("Small Talk" 2)

It is not surprising, then, that the "nonsense" that goes on in digital, networked communication is similarly disparaged. Many a parent has been perplexed (and perhaps hit hard in the pocketbook) by the never-ending series of texts that their teens are able to send to other teens without ever seeming to say anything of "value." Similarly in educational contexts, the informality of language and the tendency for participants in digital, networked communicative environments (MOOs, discussion boards, listservs, etc.) to get "off-task" and "waste time" has been noted in a variety of ways. In both classroom and non-classroom contexts, there is a perception that "what is going on online" is often a cause of concern.

It is also often a cause for laughter. It is widely recognized that digital, networked small talk is not just senseless; it's funny senselessness. In other words,as we can all, perhaps recognize, there is a whole lot of goofing off going on online.

It is easy to dismiss the combination of relational, or what has been called phatic, discourse, with funny, silly, witty components as pure distraction to the real work at hand, or, further, to determine this kind of writing has no place in learning-focused classrooms. But there is much more to it than that. As our digital networked technologies have evolved and as participation in online communities has soared worldwide, so too has a growing recognition that in digital writing environments, playfulness is a form of "doing sociability" And without sociability, other -- the "real work"-- aspects of of online discourse and connection simply fall flat.

The Project

Total Number of Student Participants
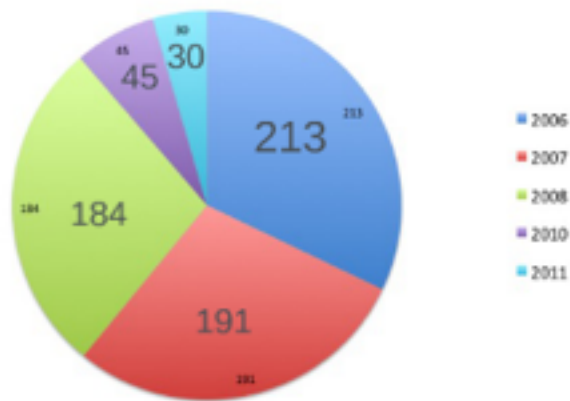
- Five Project Years (2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011)
- Columbia College Chicago, USA;
- Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth, South Africa;
- Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa;
- Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration, Volgograd, Russia)

The writing in online classrooms that creates social and relational connections, then, must be of interest to those of us who teach writing and to anyone who may teach or learn in digital, networked classrooms. It has been of considerable interest to me over the past several years as I worked in a project that connected students at my university in Chicago with students in Port Elizabeth and Stellenbosch, South Africa, and in Volgograd, Russia. (slide information - note variation in numbers of participants)

The history of the collaborative project, from beginning to end, is a story of in its own right, but in a nutshell, every northern hemisphere spring semester from 2003-2011(except 2009), the project engaged students and instructors in participating courses in networked, asynchronous, written discussions about issues such as culture/community/identity, HIV/AIDS, global politics, and human and constitutional rights. The participants and structure of the project continued to evolve as the teaching teams adapted to a variety of institutional and technological constraints, but the goals of the project remained constant: to use digital technologies to provide international learning experiences for students who did not have the means to participate in traditional exchange programs, and to create an online space in which students and teachers from vastly different backgrounds were able to share diverse perspectives, experiences, and beliefs.

Essentially students were asked to do four things with the discussion-focused portions of the IMLE no matter which course at which institution they were enrolled in: introduce themselves, respond to other students, engage in discussions with their peers over the

course of the semester on issues of local and global concern related to the course theme, and, in a nutshell, "share cultures." Beyond the discussion boards, students also posted a series of classroom-based writing reading and writing assignments in response to teacher prompts that varied by course but were visible to all participants.
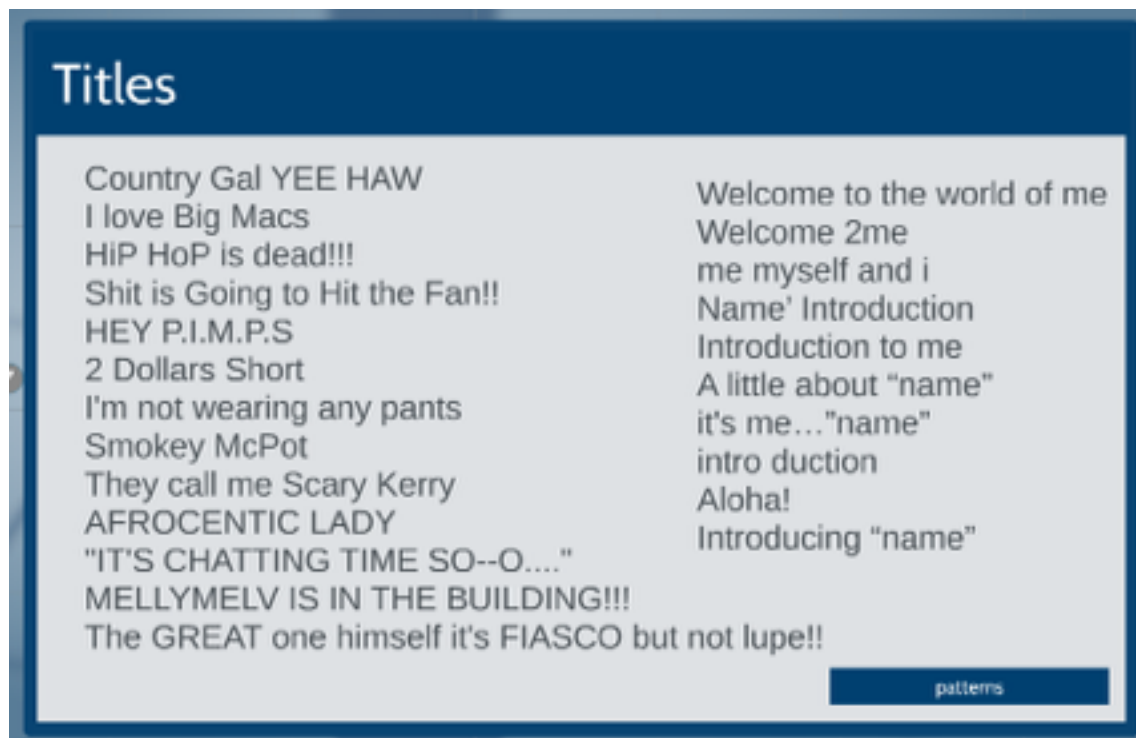

Over the years of my participation in the project, I repeatedly observed that some students successfully initiated communication and generated responses, resulting in extended discussions that continued over the course of the semester. These students achieved the project goals of sharing diverse perspectives, experiences, and beliefs, engaging in what Doreen Stark-Meyerring calls "cross-boundary knowledge making" (Globally Networked 2008 p. 6) AND they wrote. They wrote A LOT, intensively and extensively, in response to the ideas of others, negotiating agreement and disagreement, and coming to new understandings along the way. Therefore, these students not only met the project goals, they simultaneously also met many of the goals of my first-year writing classrooms.

Other students made no connections to their peers and simply used the online classroom as a space to dutifully, and most often thoroughly, respond to teacher prompts. They did not, however, share with their international partners. It's important to note that this lack of sharing took place in a classroom that specifically required peer-to-peer and peer-to-many interaction.

One of the observations that prompted my in-depth inquiry into what was what going on with the *writing* on the discussion board that might account for the difference in levels of engagement was that typical/standard ways of measuring "good and hard-working" students did not appear to correlate with which students were and were not successfully engaging in the discussion

boards. Some classroom "chatty Cathie" students posted nothing and other f2f quiet students posted tons. Or vice versa. Notably, the students who did not post were NOT students shirking the work of the course altogether. Something else was going on.

I'll now share with you a broad overview of the results of my analysis of 300 introductory and extended discussion threads from the project discussion boards from 2006-2011. I will not have the time to go into detail here about my sample selection or analytic coding scheme processes, but I the complete study/dissertation is available to you as a PDF at http://www.cwcon2014.sbmalley.com My goal right now is to give you enough information to get a sense of how what I found what I think it might mean for us in terms of *peer-to-peer online interaction and the teaching of writing.*

Titles

Country Gal YEE HAW
I love Big Macs
HiP HoP is dead!!!
Shit is Going to Hit the Fan!!
HEY P.I.M.P.S
2 Dollars Short
I'm not wearing any pants
Smokey McPot
They call me Scary Kerry
AFROCENTIC LADY
"IT'S CHATTING TIME SO--O...."
MELLYMELV IS IN THE BUILDING!!!
The GREAT one himself it's FIASCO but not lupe!!

Welcome to the world of me
Welcome 2me
me myself and i
Name' Introduction
Introduction to me
A little about "name"
it's me…"name"
intro duction
Aloha!
Introducing "name"

patterns

As Bakhtin noted long before the advent of the the online classroom, "primacy belongs to the response, as the activating principle: it creates the ground for understanding...understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition one another; one is impossible without the other. (Dialogic Imagination 1981 p. 281-282)

In the IMLE space, this mutuality of understanding and response is more evident than ever. If no one responds to a post nothing happens: no writing, no exchange, no engagement, no learning. Nothing. I began my investigation then, by sorting the student posts over the project years by sheer number of responses to a particular thread. I categorized "successful" introductory posts and discussion threads as those that generated a large amount of response posts and "unsuccessful" post as those that received no responses at all.

A pattern quickly emerged for the top response-getting introductory post titles, which you may be able to easily identify in this slide. The titles reveal something about how writers are able to gain someone's attention in IMLE space; it is not a tap on the shoulder or a typical face-to-face "Hello. How are you?" Instead, it is funny, or quirky, or silly, or exaggerated, or nonsensical, or pop-culture related, or provocative. Successful posters use playful discourse in provocative ways to inscribe paralinguistic cues in their writing, to reach out to potential readers/responders with information on how they want to be read and to invite them in, to make readers feel like they have a reason to read and respond. These posts initiate a social connection.

The unsuccessful introductory posts have a pattern of their own, noticeably making no effort to reach out to anyone; they are all "me, me, me."


These trends carried into the text of the actual introductions themselves. It is not surprising that 81% of the total written introductions were completely "me focused;" after all, one of the goals of an introduction is to tell people about yourself. Social connection and establishing relationships is another typical goal of introductions, and to that end roughly 19%, of the written introductions included both "me" and "other" focused segments. The "other" focus most often took the form of direct questions about other participants' likes and dislikes, activities, thoughts, or backgrounds.

Striking patterns in the use of playful/humorous discourse, paralinguistic cues, and references to how the discussion board introductions were working also emerged in the successful and unsuccessful introductory posts.

Unsuccssful Introductions
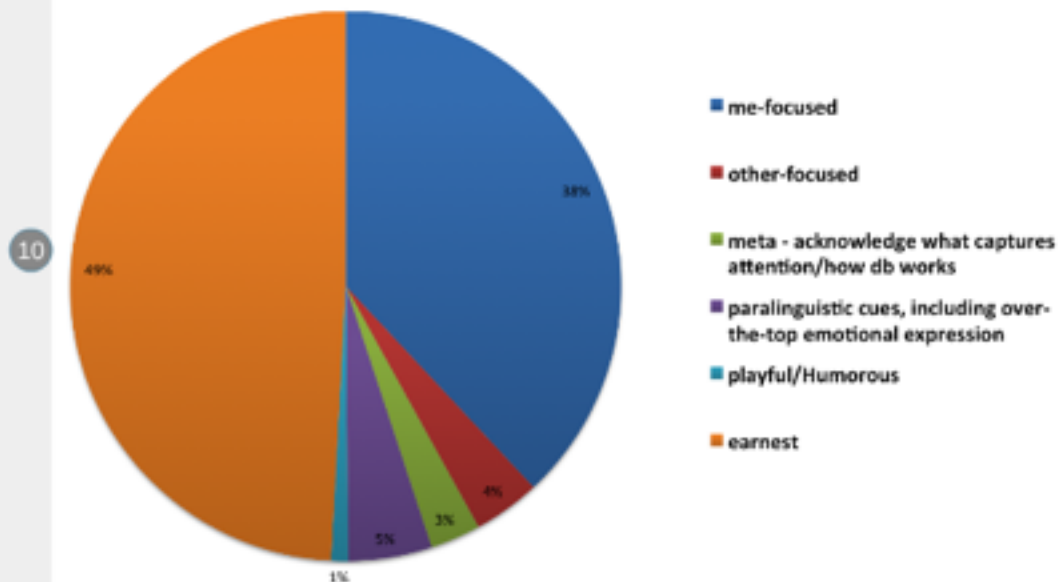
Talk about breakdown.
Unsuccessful introductions are overwhelmingly earnest, with far less humor and inscribed paralinguistic cues

earnest me focused
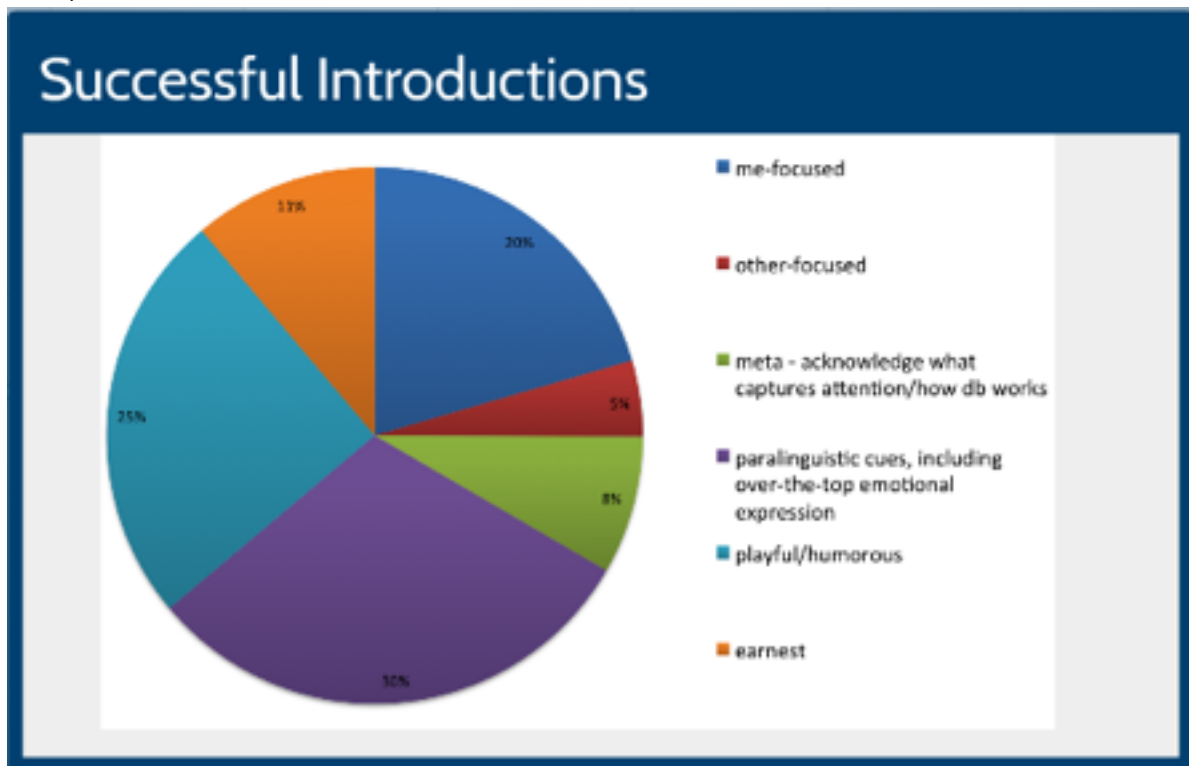
earnest me and other focused

(note - scale matters - saw this kind of post in smaller years, not in large-scale years and the other focus generated response. Economies of attention -- in the smaller room, f2f strategies work)

Talk about breakdown.
Successful introductions were dominated by playful/humorous writing heavily infused with written paralinguistic cues

In order for a segment of an introductory post to be read as playful, fun, joking, poking fun, enthusiastic, or funny, it must be written that way. I share a representative "successful" introductory post example to highlight the role that the **written playful tone and written paralinguistic cues** played in allowing students to "read" one another, to establish a tone overall, to smooth communication, and to contribute to the phatic creation of a "social fabric" (Coupland 2003).

Students wrote their playful/humorous moves in a variety of ways throughout the introductions, including: joking/"messing with" stereotypes/assumptions of others, joking/poking fun at self, joking/poking fun at the IMLE/Sharing Cultures context itself, joking and word play in general, playing back to someone, and enthusiastic invocation of pop culture or celebrity affinities.

It's important to note that the introductory posts were certainly not a string of stand-up comedy routines. Instead, the playful small talk served both to invite response and clue in readers to the emotional/affective tenor with which readers should interpret the posts. The playfulness of the relational information was interspersed with actual transactional personal information and thoughts. The impact of playful small talk rhetorical strategies was evident 88% of the successful introductions, which all had segments coded as playful/humorous in some way. That same 88% introductions also had segments coded as earnest, with about 1/3 of each post segments on average coded as playful and 2/3 coded as some form of earnest self-description. Notably, it was a combination of playful and earnest, usually with some written paralinguistic information, that consistently created the social connections necessary for continued conversation and continued learning.

The GREAT one himself it's FIASCO but not lupe!!

Whats up!!!! My name is S_____ aka fiasco how u guys doing? I'm first year student at NMMU studying Media Studies. I'm a young Xhosa male just back from the UK. I took a two-year break, living and working in the UK. It was cool and the British are cool people, really friendly and quite open to many cultures. I was born in Cape Town then moved to Bloemfontien at the age of sixteen. After arriving back in SA I was really keen to be back in the country and studying. It's been alright. So far I've met lots of cool peeps local and international. I enjoy listening to music, watching movies, chillin with my friends and going out. I'm down to earth, ambitious, just a normal cool dude. Yo people I got to go can't chat here 4eva hopefully I'll might some of one day and we kick it go out 4 a beer or something, until we chat again 'snap' almost 4got ya i got a pet lion it's called Simba, anyway tar! tar! asta la vista! peace1! cheers have a good one.

By S_____ NMMU at 2007 | Introductions

(Sharing Cultures 2007)

(note full conversation in pdf of handout)

Im bringing sexy back......heres how

Hello everyone! My name is _____. i am a junior at Columbia college double majoring in broadcast journalism and marketing communication. I am a fun girl who can turn any frown up side down. I have some pretty funny nicknames including porkchop (apparently when i was a baby i was a little pudgy) haha. Froglegs is another...i got this one basically because my friends think i have noo coordination when it comes to dancing. I have some normal nicknames too...like Barbie and ladybug.

I like to think im a funny person... (funny looking) haha just kidding. Here is a joke that describes my life...its called blonde driving:
A blonde was swerving all over the road and driving very badly, so she got pulled over by a cop.The cop walked up to her window and asked, "Miss, why are you driving so recklessly?" The blonde said, "I'm sorry sir, but wherever I go, there's always a tree in front of me and I can't seem to get away from it!"The cop looked at her and said, "Lady, that's your air freshener!"

I love the color pink, in fact my (new apartment) is all pink, from the walls to the furniture. (think Audry Hepburn in Breakfast at Tiffany's) I live alone in the city (which sucks...the alone part). One very important thing i should mention is that I'm turning 21 IN A WEEK and a half!!!!! I'm absolutely positively sooo excited about that! I hope you had a fun time reading my little rant/introduction!
By ccc at 2007-03-13 18:06 | Introductions |

When I bring up this slide, I just have to ask, how many of you introduce yourselves to strangers by announcing that you are "bringing sexy back"?

Overall, the students who were aware that they must write invitingly to be interesting enough to generate responses tended to do so by using playful discourse, playing with identity and exaggerating aspects of their personalities or life stories to get a response, using punctuation, onomatopoeia, and symbols to convey paralinguistic cues, playing with assumptions of others on the board, and playing with the activity of the board as a whole.Students who lacked the awareness of the importance of creative ways to establish connection in an IMLE wrote standard, earnest, self-focused descriptions without paralinguistic cues, which tended to fall entirely flat in that environment, no matter how lovely the person described seemed to be.

In the context of global, online learning environments that intend to establish some kind of social learning exchange, then, the initial, social, "small-talk" exchanges can and should be explored as powerful rhetorical tools for navigating social activity in IMLEs. Understanding these strategies appears to be of particular importance for getting relationships off the ground in large-scale teaching and learning spaces in which students are strangers and must work to forge social connections.

I realize that allowing and even encouraging students to write in this way, combining the playful with the earnest and guiding readers with written paralinguistic information to get conversations started and to disambiguate meaning, may be a hard sell in the classroom. This is especially true of many, many of the successful posts that I don't have time to share with you today, including those that clearly transgress the standard boundaries of what most teachers might

consider classroom-appropriate writing. In short, there's a whole lot of sex, drugs, and rock-n-roll (well, hip hop actually) openly discussed and debated.

I believe, however, that the transgressive and, possibly inappropriate humor, serves as an important social filter, particularly in an IMLE with large numbers of participants (200 or so). The decidedly "non-school" posts and jokes purposefully determine whom the students might actually want to befriend. If you write a playful post and people "get it" and "get you," they will probably respond. The people who don't "get it" won't, and then you never really have to talk to them. Pop culture references serve the same purpose. "I LOVE MOS DEF" draws in a filtered crowd. "I <3 Neil Diamond" (which certainly never appeared on these discussion boards) brings in a discrete group of players.

By inviting filtered social connections with playful, even slightly inappropriate, posts filled with funky characters and numerous explanation points!!!!!!!, I argue, and now have data to support the proposition, that these students write successfully in the IMLE in ways that appeal to our goals as teachers. It turns out that those students who are successful with the playful / paralinguistic writing in the introductions are the same students that end up being successful in the extended conversations which engage critical and argumentative writing.

(End of CW2014 talk…but, there's more. Please keep reading.)
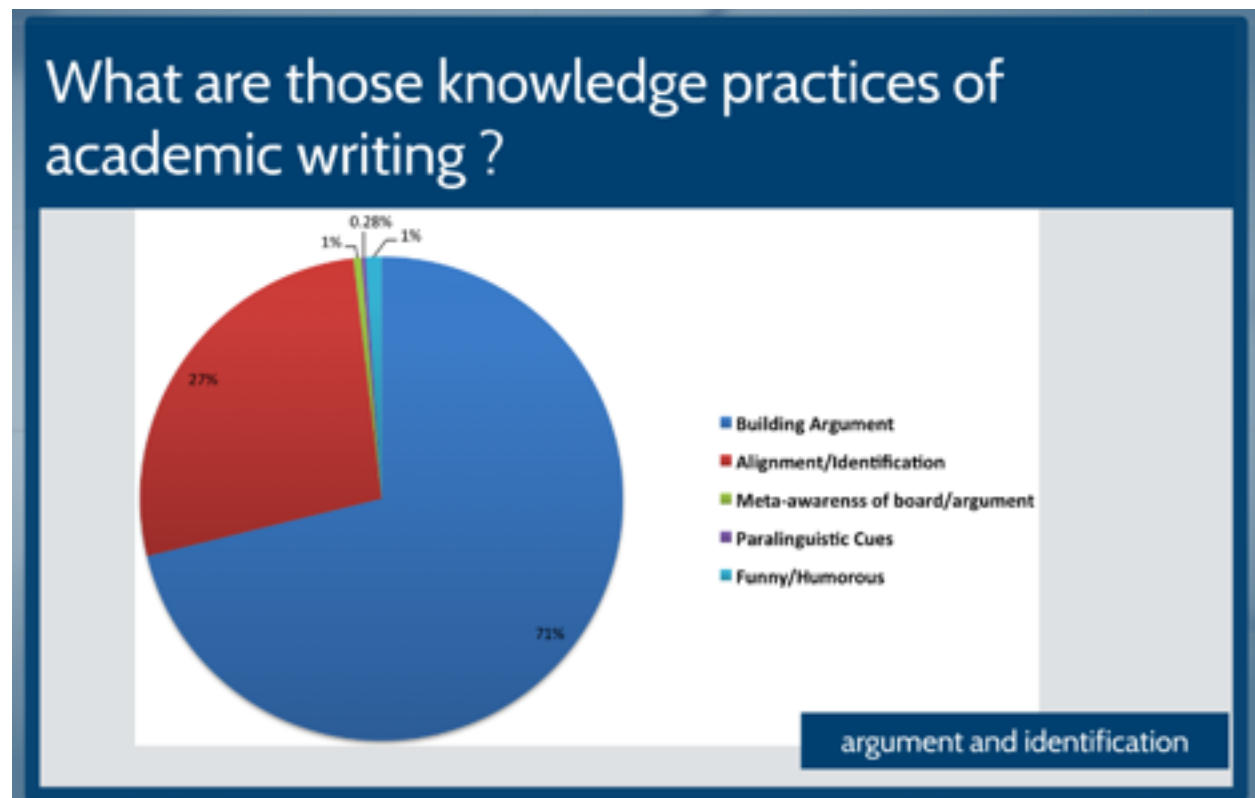
When colleagues and administrators have asked me over the years, and they have asked, what a project like this IMLE has to do with writing, I realize that they are not asking about the *extent*

to which students write. If fact, the student participants have produced the equivalent of thousands of pages of print text on the discussion boards over the five years of the project. Instead, my colleagues are asking about the kind of writing that students are doing and its value in the context of a developmental, college writing classroom. The are really asking what student work in the project has to do with *real* writing. In other words, how is this *academic* writing?

To explore this question, I moved beyond the introductory conversations and analyzed extended discussion threads that involved multiple students over the course the entire semester in each of the project years in my study. My goal in the analysis was to trace what happened after the introductions, exploring how, when, and why students wrote to one another as well as how they tackled conversations that moved into more complex or controversial arenas. Specifically, I hoped to identify how the knowledge building practices that we associate with most writing classrooms played out on the IMLE discussion boards.

My work to account for argumentation and "writing" as understood in composition and rhetoric is informed by the widely accepted understanding of writing as a socially situated activity responsive to audience, purpose, context, exigency, genre, and kairos. I think most of us could agree that "academic writing" consists of an ongoing conversation in response to other thinkers and writers that advances knowledge and presents informed arguments. Therefore, I frame "academic writing" as a form of writing that is characterized by its responsiveness to the ideas of others, which involves both processes of argument and of "identification."

For Kenneth Burke, identification "considers the ways in which individuals are at odds with one another…Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division" (22). Academic writing, then, requires a process of argumentation that includes both stating claims and evidence and the relational negotiation of agreement and disagreement in the form of an ongoing conversation in response to the ideas of others.

Before I share insights from my research into these student practices of argument and identfication in their extended discussions, I'd like to comment on two things that surprised me most in my analysis.

First, because of the ubiquitous leveraging of playful small talk and written paralinguistic cues for successful posting in the introductions, I expected those practices to continue in the relational/interpersonal or "phatic" discourse in the extended, more complex discussion. I was wrong. Those discursive practices almost disappeared from the extended discussion writing itself. However, they continued to play what is probably the most important social connecting role behind the scenes of the more complex discussions. I'll say more on that in just a moment because it is deeply connected to my second surprise.

I was aware from my initial analysis of student participation in the extended discussions over the years of the project that 34% of the students did NOT participate in the peer-to-peer interaction on the discussion boards. This is much higher engagement and completion rate the we see on MOOCs these days (largely, we know, because of the characteristics of MOOC students), but it is enough to be disturbing because these students were enrolled in courses that required that peer-to-peer engagement as part of the grade in their courses. When I traced the activity of

those students further, I discovered that while 5% of them posted an introduction and never appeared in the online space again (probably typical semester attrition), 29% posted an introduction and then dutifully wrote only in response to teacher prompts. More importantly, those 29% wrote introductions that did not get responses and they did not seek out interesting introductions to respond to. They never engaged in the social/relational small talk activities and therefore did not have the social/relational ground to stand on when entering more difficult conversations.

My analysis of the extended discussions also that highlights the way that students who successfully engaged continued to use the playful small talk practices "behind the scenes" to undergird their more "serious" conversations. Time and again, while navigating difficult and argumentative terrain, students would use a new form of relational/phatic discourse to smooth things over by saying things like "*I looked at your blog and you seem cool.*" In other words, even for students who had not previously had direct interaction in the introductions, the social connections, the WAY they wrote to one another and created response previously, provided the building blocks for further, deeper conversation.

Once the students who had successfully formed social connections deepened their conversations, in other words, once the small talk turned to big talk, many of the playful small talk rhetorical strategies used to attract and drive the social groupings in the introductory stages of the interaction fell away and students turned their attention to negotiating when and how they agreed and disagreed and establishing what, if anything, they had to learn from one another. That negotiation still included moves to maintain and repair social relationships, but those moves were no longer playful, funny, or heavily inscribed with paralinguistic cues. Instead, the writing that maintained social fabric shifted to rhetorical moves that acknowledged perceived agreement and disagreement and that sought to repair or reinforce alignment and Burkean identification.

How Students Build Argument

Building Argument	71.18%	Example Segments (as written by student participants)
Countering	30.64%	I just wanted to speak up and state that I believe your ideas of the U.S are very incorrect. The media that flows from america is a very biased form of information. It bends the overall ideas and morals of the american people. If you wish to know what america is really like, I suggest discussing your assumptions here, as assumptions, before considering them conclusions and saying so.
Clarifying	7.29%	Before I continue, I would like to highlight the fact that, regardless of what other cultures may think or do, these marriages are already legalised in the country; therefore, there is nothing that the people of the my culture can do, okay, besides the fact that they can isolate you from their culture.
Agreeing	6.14%	I definitely agree with you. Personally, I also think that Zuma is guilty.
Evidence, example, authority	8.86%	Civil rights for homosexual and transgendered people have been changing and are changing and have been changed in some of the civilized countries in this world: the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Spain, Canada, Belgium, and South Africa. Here is a link to an article about countries that have all granted the right to same-sex marriage/legal union.
New Claim	5.86%	It's more about people voting AGAINST a candidate than it is about voting FOR a candidate. I think this is due to the all the negative campaigning in US politics.

Direct question	2.94%	By the way without being too political or anything, I just would like to ask if you are interested in politics there in the States and if you are, what is your opinion on the 'run of the Presidency' between Mr. Barak Obama and Mrs. Hilary Clinton?
Direct response to question	9.59%	Actually, the world doesn't actually care whether he is Black or White, a President is a President. We have a Black president right now. But, I have a feeling that you Americans' find it very important. I understand what a cultural transformation it would be to have a Black President but you should decide about who is best for the job. I think it's Obama, but lets face it this is probably asking too much. America can say the truth, they are not keen on having a black president, not yet anyway. The answer to your question: the world is ready for a PRESIDENT who will make a difference to your country then eventually the world.

talk through percentages and examples

Students spent a significant amount of time in the extended discussions explicitly countering each other's claims and flat out disagreeing with one another (43%). This is not surprising given the controversial issues that the students chose to discuss and the fact that they began their conversations without a clear understanding of the social, political, and cultural contexts of the international peers with whom they were sharing ideas. Moreover, as first-year college students, it was not evident in their arguments that they had spent a great deal of time interrogating how cultural and societal contexts shaped their own views.

In the extended discussions, as students challenged one another, even aggressively, they also consistently made a variety of moves to clarify their counter-arguments (e.g., "Before I continue, I would like to highlight the fact that, regardless of what other cultures may think or do, these marriages are already legalised in the country") and to provide evidence and examples for their counterarguments (e.g., "Here is a link to an article about countries that have all granted the right to same-sex marriage/legal union"). This writing laid the groundwork for new ways of thinking and for new opportunities to understand how fellow students viewed the world and the issues they were discussing.

The claiming, countering, and clarifying, however, does not entirely appear to be where the negotiation of new understandings and new knowledge takes place. If these forms of writing were the only activity on the project discussion board, there would not be much sharing and exchange of ideas. Instead, the exchanges would look and feel much more like a room of people simply yelling their own opinions and arguments, with various levels of vitriol, without ever engaging in the response and negotiation aspect of argumentation that characterizes

sound rhetorical argument and academic writing. In other words, they would look a lot like comment sections on Huffington Post, or the Chronicle of Higher Education, or your local news paper -- spaces in which interlocutors feel no need to seek "identification as compensatory to division"

How Students Create Identification/ Alignment

Alignment/Identification	26.94%	Example Segments (as written by student participants)
Perceived agreement	8.80%	Like many others I am not surprised that he was not guilty. Yes, we all knew he would be innocent in the eyes of the law.
Perceived disagreement	8.53%	I know everyone doesn't see it my way and everyone is entitled to their opinion but I don't see why it is anyone's business if you are gay or straight.
Perceived understanding	2.66%	I understand what you are saying and I probably have lots of the same questions that you do.
Perceived misunderstanding	2.94%	Wow, your blog offended lots of people because they didn't really understand which point of view you were coming from.
Apology for misunderstanding	1.07%	I'm sorry. I did not mean to offend you with that message and I hope I did not. That's not what I meant at all. Please reread my original message. I never said I believed these myths and studies. I actually found the fact that people do believe them shocking.
Compliment other	2.94%	Go you! That was wonderfully written of you. I really respect that you replied in such a positive and educated way, it shows a lot for your spirit. I just wanted to thank you for giving me something inspiring to read. Thanks!

In addition to the building argument segments, the students also engaged in other important rhetorical moves of alignment and identification. These segments made up 27% of the total extended discussion segments, but their placement at key moments in highly emotional discussions played an even larger role in turning disagreement into discussion. These moves constituted the social and relational work of the extended discussions, which made room for the students to create a response-to-the-ideas-of-others conversation rather than an environment in which the discussion was shut down by proclamations of one person's "truth."

The alignment/identification segments also appeared to pick up where the playful/social connection work done in the introductions left off. In the alignment/identification analysis, I focused on the social moves that students used to negotiate perceptions of division and perceptions of agreement, identifying the writing that explicitly did the work of articulating those perceptions, either to cause more division or to attempt to ameliorate the division, work towards repair, and create a sense of alignment. Notably, the student writers consistently tempered their arguments by commenting on whether they sensed agreement, sensed disagreement, sensed understanding, sensed misunderstanding, needed to apologize, or wanted to compliment what others had to say.

There may appear to be overlap between the agreeing/ disagreeing subcodes in building argument and the perceived agreement/ perceived disagreement subcodes in alignment/ identification, but clear distinctions emerged in how students wrote those segments and what purposes the segments served.

Perceived agreement and perceived disagreement segments tended to sum up where the participants in a discussion stood in general (e.g., "Yes, we all knew he would be innocent in the eyes of the law" and "I know everyone doesn't see it my way"), often pointing to new directions for further discussion or leading to a follow-up questions. These stated perceptions were distinct from the direct statements of agreement (e.g., "I definitely agree with you") and disagreement (e.g., "I believe your ideas of the U.S are very incorrect") found in the building argument segments.

Likewise, perceived understanding and perceived misunderstanding functioned quite differently from perceived agreement/perceived disagreement. In the cases of perceived understanding, students indicated to one another that they "got it" and that they knew where their peers were coming from (e.g., "I understand what you are saying and I probably have lots of the same questions that you do"), but they did not necessarily agree with stated positions or claims that they understood (e.g., "I get where you are coming from, but as a Christian, I can't pick and choose the parts of Christianity I want to be"). Similarly, the statements of perceived misunderstanding were not tied to agreement or disagreement but rather to moves to redirect the discussion in light of the misunderstanding (e.g., "Wow, your blog offended lots of people because they didn't really understand which point of view you were coming from. I get it, but you might want to explain"). Interestingly, the misunderstandings were always a catalyst for direct apologies. All 54 direct apology segments appeared in the extended discussions in response to a misunderstanding that had been identified (e.g., "I'm sorry. I did not mean to offend you with that message and I hope I did not. That's not what I meant at all"). Students did not apologize for perceived or actual disagreements, but they did take responsibility and apologize if they thought that what they wrote had been misunderstood.

One other important identification/alignment rhetorical move students made in the midst of building arguments was to compliment each other's views/writing (e.g., "Go you! That was wonderfully written of you. I really respect that you replied in such a positive and educated way, it shows a lot for your spirit. I just wanted you to thank you for giving me something inspiring to read. Thanks!"). These compliment segments occurred in the most emotionally contested discussions and they served as markers of what students seemed to hope resulted from the discussion board experience. Across the 149 segments coded as "compliment other," there was a distinct pattern of what students complimented in addition to general comments about a student's posting activity (e.g., "I read your blog. You seem cool"); they admired "thoughtful," "inspiring," "brave" (e.g., posing a difficult question), "honest," "thought-provoking," and "smart" posts about complex issues. In these segments, students provided encouragement for the complex conversations to continue; they complimented the writers so that they would continue to write such things. At the same time, by pointing out key example posts as smart and inspiring, the students created agreement and alignment about the characteristics of a successful project exchange would look like.

Overall, the alignment/identification segments were interspersed throughout the building argument segments and, like the playful small talk segments in the introductions, they provided social cues on how the writers wished to be read, what it is they hoped to convey, and in what ways they identified with or saw themselves aligned with their readers. These relational moves in the writing played an important role in making adjustments to the tone of the discussions and in highlighting the need for students to make clarifications; they were indeed "compensatory to division" (Burke) and, perhaps most importantly, they signaled to other writers/participants that they had been "heard," creating a response process crucial to moving argument and learning forward.

What does this mean for *What We Do?*

1 Students that successfully make connections and, therefore, continue to engage in conversations with their peers write a considerable amount, exploring thoughts and ideas for, with, and from other students in addition to any formal or informal writing assigned by their teachers.

2 The goofing off, transgressive humor, and general messing around that students engage in at the beginning stages of IMLE interaction perform the social and relational work **necessary** for extended and more serious discussion and for learning.

3 In the more serious discussions students consistently combine transactional "building argument" moves to make and support claims while using relational "identification and alignment" moves to demonstrate how and when they are able to accommodate and understand, if not agree with, new information and opposing stances.

4 These relational and transactional moves appear in tandem in some way in all of the successful, response-producing interactions. The extended discussions are pushed forward through claims and examples that are tempered by acknowledged agreement and understanding or disagreement and misunderstanding. When information is simply put forward, whether well founded or not, without the relational alignment/identification segments, the exchange breaks down.

My conclusions may seem obvious, but phatic and relational speech and writing, in both face-to-face and in digital, networked environments, are often discounted as extraneous to the real writing tasks at hand, when considered in positive terms, or as nonsense and a waste of time when articulated in negative terms. My research demonstrates that such writing is fundamentally necessary for the other forms of writing and learning to happen in an IMLE.

As teachers who create internet-mediated learning spaces for writing classrooms and who develop expectations for what students will write in them, we need to take into account the ways in which the underpinnings of social conventions shift and change in digital networked environments. While no easy formula exists to create the perfect, attention-getting, conversation-sustaining IMLE discussion board post, students and teachers can be taught to be aware of how relational rhetorical strategies are merged with transactional writing in digital

networked writing spaces and how to make the best use of them for the digital rhetorical situations in which they find themselves.