Negotiating Textual Talk: Conversation Analysis, Pedagogy, and the Organisation of Online Asynchronous Discourse

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Abstract

This paper uses Conversation Analysis to investigate the ways in which participants in an online asynchronous postgraduate reading group managed and negotiated their contributions within the discussion. Using the conversation analytic concerns with sequential organisation, adjacency pairs and topicality, this article shows the analytic insights that this perspective can bring to the examination of written asynchronous discourse. The paper shows that in the section of the discussion analysed here, the discourse displayed remarkable similarities to the ways in which face-to-face conversation has been seen to operate in terms of the organisation of conversational turns, the application of specific interactional rights, the lineal development of topics of conversation, and the structural use of question-answer turn pairs. The paper concludes by showing how this form of analysis can relate to the formation of reflexive pedagogy in which course design can be created to take account of such findings. It shows how a detailed understanding of how pedagogy is played out in interaction is fundamental for reflecting on the relationship between pedagogic aims and educational practice.

Introduction

The use of asynchronous discussion environments as a forum for academic discussion is now a commonplace feature of course delivery in Higher Education (Lim and Cheah, 2003). This is part of a more general increase in the use of distributed learning technology in HE. Taking the UK as an example, a survey of British Higher Education institutions conducted in 2005 found that only 5% of the institutions sampled did not use at least one Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) (Brown et al 2005). VLE's of course are only a small part of the story, as Blogs, Wiki's, Podcasts and other communication modes also increasingly become mainstream features of educational participation and delivery. One of the central arguments in this paper is that it is fundamentally important to understand the specific ways in which these technologies can shape the practical accomplishment of educational tasks. In this paper, I define pedagogy as the development of plans for the organisation of educational activities and for the structure of learning and teaching materials, resources and technologies. The enactment of pedagogy consists in the in-situ interactional work to which such plans pertain. There is a difference between pedagogic design and the actual practices to which it relates. I argue that it is important to work out how technologies are put to use in the playing out of interaction in order to fully understand the ways in which we may create pedagogic structures that take advantage of the affordances of

such environments.

Where it has been concerned with interaction in asynchronous forums, qualitative research has used forms of thematic analysis, content analysis (Barrett and Lally, 1999) and discourse analysis or ethnography (Browne, 2003); very little has been undertaken from a conversation analytic perspective (Ten Have, 1999). A significant theme within this literature has been the ways in which the asynchronous medium may facilitate or 'afford' particular use strategies (Conole and Dyke, 2004; Kreijins et al, 2002; Ruhleder, 2002). The general concern here is with how the medium itself may offer up particular use strategies through the design of the environment and the types of pedagogic strategies that are brought to bear on them (Mcateer et al, 1997). I aim to show here that Conversation Analysis' focus on 'members' methods' can provide a very useful addition to this analytic concern. Conversation Analysis provides an insightful comparative frame for thinking about how conversation can be achieved in face-to-face environments as against online environments. One of the results of the analysis carried out in this paper is to show the strong similarities between the discourse shown here and modes of interaction found in synchronous face-to-face communication environments. This finding may seem to contradict conclusions related to the apparent differences of asynchronous communication medium (e.g. Light and Light 1999) but the point of my analysis is not to describe different features of the medium, but to show how

CA can enable us to focus on the methods through which conversational participants use communication resources. I do not suggest that this analysis describes an inherent characteristic of this mode of communication, but merely that synchronous discourse represents a potential usage strategy. This paper aims to develop the view that focusing on the methods through which discourse participants play out educational activities is a useful analytic framework and to show how such analysis may impact on pedagogic conceptualisation.

Conversation Analysis

Conversation Analysis (or CA) can be usefully thought of as a 'sister discipline' to ethnomethodolgoy (or EM), and to share the concern of the latter with the investigation of the methods by which societal 'members' (a term preferred in this perspective to others such as 'social actor' or 'social participant') locally assemble a *sense of* social order. EM and CA are both interested in the ways that people's activities create what they regard as observable social phenomena of some kind, like 'a conversation between friends', 'a job interview', or the enactment of a legal judgement. For Conversation Analysis this concern has involved an investigation of the ways in which members organise their talk and analyse each other's conversations in the construction and negotiation of social practices. The empirical output of CA studies has been immense, and I wish to refer to just three general areas.

The first area pertains to the sequential organisation of talk. CA was developed by Harvey Sacks in the late 1960's as a means of examining the methods through which people organised their conversations. One of the starting points of Sacks' analysis of talk was the problematic of how participants in conversations between more than two people manage the exchange of turns. As Sacks points out, in almost all conversational settings people observably orientate to the preference that only one speaker talks at any given time (although there may be more than one conversation in progress if there is a group of people). In two-party or *dyadic* conversation this is achieved through the alteration of turns; Sacks emphasised that the enactment of such alteration requires considerable skill and regular negotiation over aspects such as the precise start and end points of utterances, their preferred length, the appropriate content of turns, or the functional relation between utterances (Sacks 1995: 130). Multi-party conversation is accomplished through a continual negotiation over who speaks next. This process of negotiation has been simplified into a three part 'rule-set': (a) the current speaker may select the next speaker or, (b) the next speaker may self-select, or (c) the current speaker may continue speaking (Schegloff et al, 1974). The realisation of these 'rules' is a process of regular negotiation that frequently results in regular overlap in talk (Gibson et al, 2006). The examination of the process of organising talk through sequences of turn utterances remains a key concern in CA, and a means of exploring the accomplishment of conversation. I shall be using this analytic focus in the

examination of data presented in this paper.

The second key concern for CA that I wish to highlight here has been the investigation of adjacency pairs. This concern stems from sequential turn analysis, and involves an examination of how turns in conversations can be hearably linked as two parts sequences, such as 'question-answer', 'complaint-apology', or 'greeting-greeting'. Sacks proposed that such sequences have the following characteristics: that the first part of the pair implies a preference that the second be produced, and that where it is not produces, that it will be heard as absent and may require some form of repair work like repeating the first part of the pair. So, for example, the question 'how are you?' carries with it the strong imperative that a related response of some type be produced by the other party ('fine thanks. You?', would likely be heard as fulfilling this requirement where as no response or 'I saw Sarah the other day' would probably not and may have some form of interactional consequence). Such sequential pairs are, Sacks shows, important mechanisms of ordering conversation and have been a profitable analytic device for researchers (e.g. Whalen and Zimmerman, 187; Garcia and Jacobs, 1998; Marakoshi et al, 2000; Stokoe and Smithson, 2001).

The final area of CA research I wish to draw attention to is that of topic organisation. This area has used the analytic frame of both sequentiality and adjacency-pairs to examining the ways that particular topics of talk are

brought about, closed-off and otherwise negotiated. For example, Button and Casey explored this idea in some detail to provide a rich account of some of the preferences surrounding the opening up of new topics from previous ones (Button and Casey, 1984) and the nomination of specific topics for discussion (Button and Casey, 1985; 1988/89). For example, Button and Casey (1985) show how new topics of conversation can be solicited for by speakers 'eliciting' topics of talk (e.g. 'have you got any gossip?') or by presenting newsworthy topics (e.g. 'well, I saw Jane the other day'). Where they are solicited, participants can either present a piece of news, decline to present, or offer an opportunity for another party to present a piece of news. Where a new topic is presented, participants can either accept or reject it. The analysis concerns the ways in which topic organisation is played out across conversational turns using strategies such as question-answer adjacency pairs.

In this paper I wish to use these three areas of enquiry (sequential organisation, adjacency pairs, and topic organisation) as analytic frames for exploring the ways in which researchers may analyse the organisation of conversations in asynchronous online environments. It is my contention that CA's empirical insights about the social organisation of spoken talk have considerable analytic value in foregrounding the distinctive ways in which people manage text-based talk. In particular, I will argue that this analysis can help us to interrogate the playing out of online learning pedagogy. Before this

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however, I will briefly outline some of the work undertaken within Conversation Analysis in traditional classroom contexts and then move to look at examples of the small amount of work that has been undertaken within CA and EM in the examination of text.

Conversation Analysis and the investigation of face to face and online asynchronous classroom talk

McHoul's (1978) highly influential work has focussed on the ways in which turn-taking is managed in classrooms as a means of limiting the potential problems that may arise from having multiple speakers. He drew attention to the substantial participation rights that exist between teachers and students in terms of the selection of next speakers and the acceptable frequencies and placements of interjection within other's speech. In this and later work (1982) McHoul dealt with the issue of repair within the classroom. This work builds on classic CA studies (e.g. Schegloff, Sacks and Jefferson, 1974), which showed that where a talk turn can be taken to display some trouble or other, there is a preference that the person who's turn constituted the trouble initiate its repair (i.e. that the person who *makes* the mistake, *corrects* or at least *acknowledges* the mistake).

McHoul argued that in classroom talk this pattern is observably different as teachers can often be seen to initiate such repairs. McHoul shows how using a three turn Initiation-Reply-Evaluation (IRE) sequence, in which tutors ask a

question, students reply, and tutors evaluate the reply; tutors typically used the third turn to repair or initiate the repair of students' contributions (See also Macbeth's 2004 alternative analysis of this problem). The analytic framework of IRE sequences has also been used by Mori (2002) in a study of the structures of question and answer between discussants in a Japanese language classroom. Mori applied the IRE framework to look at how students discussing in a classroom systematically deviated from the three-part sequence by failing to develop or evaluate the answer provided by their colleagues and, instead, simply moved to initiate a new question and answer sequence. Mori used this analysis to reflect on the pedagogic design of the activity and to question the ways in which the aims of the class could be improved. As Mori's study nicely highlights, the analysis of conversation in this way is important for reflecting on the pedagogic goals of a given activity. By revealing the character of the interactive work that constitutes the enactment of pedagogy, we are able to reflect in a grounded way on the instructional design to which such activities pertain.

Very little work in either EM or CA has concerned itself with communication and text. McHoul's (1982) work on reading used an ethnomethodologic analysis to capture the sense-making processes and textual resources with which the study participants worked through various texts. For example, McHoul put together random lines from different poems by various authors to create a piece of text which he presented to readers. Readers where shown

one line of this 'poem' at a time and asked to make sense of them. McHoul showed that readers adopted several strategies to help them make sense of the poem: for example, readers assumed the presence of an individual author with particular meaning intentions in the design of the poem; readers used the sequential order of the lines in the poem to make sense of the writing (e.g. by using a line to give sense to what went before it); readers avoided the conclusion that the poem was meaningless and tried to uncover patterns of meaning; readers skipped lines that were a 'bad fit' with the sense of the poem they were constructing. Just as Sacks showed with spoken conversation, McHoul demonstrates that readers use a range of methods to uncover an assumed sense within the written text.

Ten Have (1999) has argued that an ethnomethodologic/CA framework may be useful for examining the ways in which people write in online discussion forums. Ten Have argues that learning to write involves learning how to structure ones writing such that it directs a reader in particular ways. Analysts can usefully turn their attention to the resources that people draw on in doing this 'structuring work' within their writing (McHoul, 1982). Ten Have suggests that just as turn-taking in spoken conversation can be inspected to see how participants negotiate the social organisation of a given event, so written turns within an online conversation can be examined to foreground the interactional work involved in the construction of that particular form of social organisation; "In some forms of [Computer Medicated Communication], one could use a

similar strategy, in that, for instance, later contributions to a 'thread' in a 'news group' or 'discussion list' can be used to inspect at least some members' analysis of previous postings" (1999: 276). This might entail, Ten Have suggests, the examination of the 'reading path' or textual instructions created within asynchronous postings that help the reader make sense of the talk.

In this paper I follow this argument by providing an empirical examination of a discussion within a single thread of an asynchronous discussion board. I show that the concern with synchronicity, adjacency pairs and topicality enables us to highlight some interesting characteristics of the interactional work being undertaken online.

Method

The data presented below is taken from an online reading group held as part of a postgraduate research training programme within an interdisciplinary higher education institute in London. The reading group was a non-assessed optional study module that students could take. The module ran for six weeks and involved students reading one or two pre-specified readings on a prescribed author each week. The reading group was run through Blackboard and all assigned readings were uploaded into the VLE and discussion was held through the asynchronous bulletin boards. There were twelve registered participants within the group with between eight and ten active participants each week (one of which was the tutor). Typically, there was one discussion

board each week, but on a few occasions the group created more than one discussion board in order to create separate areas for separate issues. A new discussion board and set of readings would be made available on the Monday of each week, but discussions frequently continued for more than a week. By the end of the course there were ten separate discussion boards running, each one being used to discuss a particular author and set of readings.

Written permission was received from all participants for conducting this research, and all agreed to the anonymised use of the data for publication. While all of the discussions over this period were downloaded and analysed, the analysis presented here concerns one thread within one discussion board; this discussion took place over the course of seven days in the third week of the course. There were a total of fifty-eight posts in this discussion, spread across eight different discussion threads.

Within the reading group, each week the tutor provided a task for the group discussion. In the week being analyzed students were asked to contribute three posts: one that responded to one of three possible questions about the assigned week's reading; another that posed a new question about that reading; and a final post that responded to one of the other discussants questions. Within the instructions it was emphasized that these tasks were designed to give students a way of orientating to the readings, and to encourage discussions, and were not to be treated as the only way to use the

discussion boards. Thus, students were encouraged to use the discussion boards as a general forum for discussing the readings (e.g. asking questions, soliciting opinions on the difficulty of the readings, exchanging their views on the readings, etc) and not just as a forum for achieving the specific educational tasks.

Amongst the group there was a range in the level of experience of online learning environments, with some students having completed qualifications through online courses while others were participating in online discussion for the first time. Seven of the participants were male and five were female.

Analysis

The discussion that follows concerns the series of five posts depicted in figure One. This branch of postings was the second of eight branches within the discussion board and involved four different participants (anonymised) over a three-day period. The 'P' and number to the left hand side of each name refer to the number of the post within the chronology of the discussion board. This information was not represented on the discussion board but is analytically relevant here as it shows the discursive work that was going on elsewhere in the discussion board between the posts.

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

Posts 6 (by 'Jane) starts the thread by posting two questions. In the next post

(post 8) the tutor compliments these questions and invites other participants to answer the questions. In post 10 Sarah addresses the second question posed by Jane in Post 6. Post 13 by Anne responds to Sarah and includes a quotation from Sarah's text. Anne ends her post by posing another question. The final message in this thread (post 26) by the tutor responds directly to Anne's post (again using a quotation of Anne's text within the response) and asks another question related to her posting. In many respects, these posts display nicely some of the key characteristics of asynchronous discussions, e.g. the ability of contributors to quote other participants very accurately and to 'jump turns' by addressing posts non-chronologically; the ability to keep a conversation going over a long period of time, and to use visual links to display the relation of posts to one another. However, when we look at the posts in more detail through a conversation analytic frame we can see some very strong similarities with findings regarding the organisation of talk in face-to-face settings.

EXTRACT 1 ABOUT HERE

The evident function of post six (Extract 1) is that of posing questions relate to the reading – a function created through the use of question marks as well as through the title 'Question about the reading' in the subject heading. The title is used here not just to display the topic under discussion, but also to display

a potential interactional function of the post as the first part in a question-answer pair. As per the pedagogic aims of the reading group (i.e. as a discussion environment), the post is discursively orientated and not a self-contained unit of text.

The questions included in Post 6 are not preceded with any contextualisation of their function (e.g. how they emerged or who they are directed to). However, it is possible to read the questions as a response to the tasks instruction, which asked students to post a message in the form of a question. The lack of contextual provision, however, (like 'here is my question for this activity ') meant that this is not the only reading of the post, which could equally simply be a question responding to an earlier post. As this is only the sixth post in the discussion board the pre-existing context is, at this stage (i.e. in the morning of the 14th of the January), quite easy to navigate and to discover that the post does not apparently relate to an existing post. However, participants need to actively track-down the existing five posts in order to figure this out, which is not a straightforward thing to do as the posts are not labelled in terms of their chronology. Any reader who comes to this post once there are a lot more posts and branch topics will find it very difficult to work out the precise 'discursive context' in which this posting was made. In this way, the post displays an ambiguity that can be described in the following way: the absence of a shared experience of the discursive environment (i.e. that participants are likely to have read through the postings in different orders

and in different levels of detail) means that difficulties may arise in divining the interactional purposes of utterances. In this instance, the absence of discourse markers that situate the interactional intentions of the post create complications for readers trying build a context for interpreting the post.

EXTRACT 2 ABOUT HERE

The next post (Post 8 – see Extract 2) is made by the tutor and can be read as a typical 'topic acceptance' move, in which the proposed area of discussion is accepted, and the involvement of another participant is solicited. As briefly noted earlier, educational discussion environments are distinctive from 'ordinary' (or non-institutional) conversation in terms of topic management as they are characterised by particular discussion rights (McHoul, 1978). In this instance, the differential rights take the form of an orientation turn, in which the question posed by the participant is directed to the group. Typically, this is a right that is reserved for tutors and not students. As McHoul (1978) has made clear, such interactional occurrences are part of an armoury of interactional strategies (which include things like closing-off discussants, or nominating particular people) that enable the tutor to manage the flow of conversation between multiple parties. The employment of the turn here implies that the management of posting turns is of concern to the tutor in a similar way to face-to-face conversation. Thus, in spite of the asynchronous nature of the environment, this posting suggests that the management of

synchronicity is important. Such strategies are not just about turn management but also demonstrate an orientation to constructivist pedagogy in which there is a strong preference for avoiding the 'teacher as knowledge source' model, and encouraging participation from group members. The 'playing out' or *enactment* of pedagogy is achieved here through the implementation of a conversational turn that *displays* the roles of the tutor and, consequently, the roles of the student.

In addition to the sequential achievement of constructivist pedagogy through the implementation of question orientation rights, post eight also displays an acceptance of the proposed topics of conversation offered by Jane in post 6. As has been shown elsewhere (Gibson et al, 2006) conversations in face-to-face educational environments are characterised by a continual negotiation over what it to count as the topic under discussion. Post 8 by the tutor shows clearly a concern with the negotiation over topicality as they use their tutor status and its distinctive interactional privileges to essentially 'accept' the question as a legitimate topic of conversation (Button and Casey 1984) and to encourage the members of the discussion group to address it. Within this posting then, the tutor is observably treating the question in post 6 in the same way as they might in a spoken discourse environment – that is, as the first part of a question-answer sequence. They display the interactional preference that an *answer* be provided for the question turn.

In summary then, through the utilisation of tutor specific interactional rights to treat the preceeding question as part of a sequence, and the use of a topic acceptance/opening strategy, post 8 shows remarkable similarities with the ways in which similar educational conversations have been seen to occur in face-to-face settings.

EXTRACT 3 ABOUT HERE

As with its preceding post, post 10 (Extract 3) does not demonstrate through names that it is explicitly orientating towards a preceding post. It has been shown that 'ordinary' two party face-to-face conversation operates with a preference that names are used minimally (Sacks, 1995). In contrast, conversations in more formal and multi-party settings are often characterised by an increased use of names. In such settings, including educational ones, names overcome the potential interactional problems resulting from an ambiguity concerning the recipients of questions. In face-to-face settings gesture is also a key communicative feature that helps to display the nature of a member's interactive orientation (McNiell, 2000). Further, post 10 contains none of the other discourse markers that one may expect to find in face-to-face talk that are routinely used to indicate that a specified topic is being taken up. Schiffrin (1988) has shown that in addition to names, words such as

'well', 'erm' or 'yeah' often operate as devices to demonstrate an orientation to such invitations to speak (see also Button and Casey 1984).

The absence of such discourse markers is of course offset by the fact that the post is visibly branched from post 6, and that it contains the same title 'Question about the Reading' in the subject heading. We might interpret these features as topical markers that display the interactional and topical intentions of the post. We may see them, in CA terms, as accepting the topical move proposed in post 6; as helping the reader to see the post as constituting the second part in a question-answer adjacency pair, and as continuing the synchronous and turn-by-turn development of conversation.

However, this reading must recognise that both the title and the subject heading are pre-specified and built-in characteristics of how a post will be represented when a contributor replies to a post within a given thread. In other words, it is hard to know whether these features are *designed* as topical markers by the contributor or are simply features of the way in which the post is represented as a reply (i.e. if you just press 'reply', the post will appear like this automatically, but the post may not be intended or interactionally designed as a reply). The branch placement and title are not on their own good guides to the interactional role of the post.

Another way in which the post can be read as a response to Jane's question

in post 6 is through the vocabulary that is used within its content. A topical link to the two preceding posts can be achieved by seeing the phrase "Here then is recognition of the autonomy or self-determination of individuals in symbolic interactionism" (last line of paragraph one of post 6) as using the same vocabularly terms 'individual' and 'self determination' as used in Jane's post 6. As Sacks showed in relation to face-to-face talk, there is a preference that once a particular term has been used to name/identify/describe/characterise a given thing, that the same term be used again on subsequent occasions (Sacks 1995 and see Silverman 1998: 13-16). The similarity of dialogue form then displays the orientation of this post towards the topics raised in post 6.

Further, we might also say that given the tutor's preceding post as functionally similar to normal discourse practice in face-to-face talk, perhaps there is an observable preference being built up for reading posts in a synchronous position as being topically linked. In other words, as the tutor's post displays a re-enactment of the principle 'see the next turn in a sequence of posts as functionally linked to its predecesor', then perhaps Sarah's absence of discourse markers such as names simply implies that she is following the same rule. However, there is ambiguity here as the post is not a branched reply to the tutor but a reply to Jane, which visually may imply that it is not related directly to the tutor. Again then, the representational structure of the system may complicate the ways in which turns are conventionally managed.

In spite of this ambiguity, the analytic models presented in work on face-to-face discourse would lead us to expect a turn placement following a re-direction by a tutor (as in post 8) to address the specified topic. Through the methods referred to above (i.e. next turn placement, vocabularly, title, structure), the post observably achieves the interactional role of providing an answer in a two-part question-answer sequence. Further, it orientates to other typical practices of answer position 'utterances' by not only responding to the question, but also using the answer position to develop a new question (Button and Casey, 1984; Mori, 2002), i.e. the final section of the last paragraph that begins; "But this seems to me to be an incomplete account of autonomy in social interaction. What makes the exercise of autonomy in social interaction possible (and/or impossible)? [....]". As such, post 10 represents not only a functional answer to Jane's question in post 6 but also initiates a new question answer sequence on a topic that is born out of the answer. In this way, Sarah's post replicates an observed preference in synchronous face-to-face talk that new topics are seen to come from existing ones (Sacks 1995; Button and Casey, 1984), and that changes of topic occur at appropriate topic change places.

EXTRACT 4 ABOUT HERE

Post 13's beginning "I am trying to think around your trouble […]" (Extract 4)

can be read as topicalising the final sentence of its preceding post. As with post 10 then, this post begins by displaying an orientation towards the question posed in the posting that preceded it. In so doing, post 13 replicates the preference found in face-to-face talk that next turns are functionally orientated to directly preceding utterances. A striking feature of how this is achieved however is through the use of a quotation of the preceding text. The preceding text is used as a resource to create clarity in the topical link that is being established. The design of the response then builds in the exact text to which it is a response. In this respect, the written textual environment offers a distinct set of resources that are not so readily available to participants in verbal conversations; the re-usability of existing contributions online is much more straightforward than in spoken conversation where, typically, speakers do not have access to 'exacly what was said' and need to rely on memory as a resource.

This explicit beginning of post 13 contrasts with the way that post 10 orientated towards the question posed in post 6; in post 13, clear discourse markers are in place to demonstrate the functional purpose of the post. While again no name is used (Anne simply refers to 'your *trouble* […]') the quotation and the post position as sequentially linked to Sarah's contribution are sufficient to create an easily retrievable reading link. However, it is noticeable that the subject heading has not been changed. Anne's post completes the second of two topic shifts within this sequence of posts but has not changed

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the 'design' of the subject heading. The visual representation of the posts as linked together with the subject heading creates a representation of the posts as 'of the same topic', but the participants' sequential exchanges display sequential topic movement. This observation perhaps adds weight to the concern over the ways in which built-in preferences of representation (i.e. subject headings) may create ambiguities about interactional purposes.

EXTRACT 5 ABOUT HERE

Post 26 (Extract 5) again adheres to many of the sequential properties that one would expect to see in face-to-face talk. The tutor begins by topicalising a piece of the text in the immediately prior posting and in so doing displays a similar approach to generating topics in relation to an immediately preceding turn. As with post 13 the tutor quotes the text to which the newly constructed topic relates

The quotation of Anne's contribution at the start of post 26 does not identify the exact place where the text is to be found. While addressing the student by name makes clear that it is the her that is being addressed rather than anyone else, the absence of a marker of where the quotation comes from means that the reader needs to inspect the whole of Anne's text in order to ascertain the specific context in which this quote was given. Unlike Anne's

use of the quotation to topicalise Sarah's posting, the tutor's quotation topicalises a piece of text in the middle of Anne's post. Apart from the precision offered through the use of a quotation, there is nothing particularly striking about the way that this topicalisation happens as in face-to-face talk, new topic initiations may use any of the existing talk as a resource for bringing something up. However, it is precisely in this similarity with face-to-face strategies for topic development that the interest lies; while the facility to quote in detail offers a new discursive ability, the general rule of 'use only appropriate places to make a new topic' and 'use the existing talk as a resource for those topics' are, as in all the posts following post 6, still visibly used.

In addition to these more technical points, there are a number of distinctive writing strategies present in all the above posts: the use of italics, bold and colour to emphasise particular words; brackets to segment off sections of sentences; quotations to reference in details the reading that is being discussed; paragraphs to visually represent separation; question marks commas, dashes, quotation marks and full stops – all these visual devices serve as medium-specific resources for demonstrating the intentions of the authors.

Discussion

The central aim of this paper is to explore the applications of Conversation Analysis as a perspective for examining asynchronous discourse. In the final section I will tease out some of the implications of the analysis presented above and assess its value as an analytic framework.

The analysis provided so far can be summarised in the following way: there were strong similarities between the ways in which educational talk was developed in these asynchronous conversations and findings regarding the organisation of talk in face-to-face educational settings. The similarities that I identified were the strictly sequential organisation of talk, with one turn observably dealing with the one that preceded it; the use of adjacency pair structures through question-answer sections; the orientation to preferences regarding differential interactional rights for tutors and students; the development of topics of conversation through the production of sequential rules about when and how topics should move from one another. I do not claim, however, that these represent general characteristics of asynchronous discussion environments, but rather that they are strategies of working within a potentially wide range of interactional possibilities. It is quite possible, or even *likely* that very different interactional characteristics may be found in other settings. The point I wish to emphasise is that they represent one possible way of working within asynchronous environments. I will now turn to reflect on some of the implications of this analysis.

Pedagogy in action and its implications

At the beginning of this paper I presented a definition of pedagogy as a set of plans or design principles for the structure of educational materials and for how students are to use and interact with such materials. I stated that the realisation of pedagogy can usefully be understood in terms of the specific interactional work that gets done between students and tutors and the ways in which they put materials to work in these interactions. The importance of the analysis presented here is in enabling us to see the relationship between pedagogic plans, pedagogic work and technology. We can see, for example, that asynchronicity is not necessarily best contrasted with synchronicity, as the latter can be undertaken in environments designed for the former. Rather, a more useful focus for the purposes of understanding interaction may be on methods of participation and their relation to technological structures. As the analysis above demonstrates, such a focus brings to the fore discursive characteristics that may otherwise go unnoticed and which may have important implications for pedagogic design. In this particular course, the observation that discourse was in parts at least similar to discourse in face-to-face forums may be used to reflect on encouraging particular types of discourse strategies. 'Synchronous style conversations' of the type discussed here may be adopted as a particular mode of discourse, and students could be provided with sets of rules that enable them to enact that discourse (e.g. 'always respond to the most recent post' or 'always relate your comments to

the topic that has just been created'). Alternatively of course, this mode of discourse may be actively *discouraged* in order to bring out the distinctive features of the asynchronous mode; students could be instructed to make discursive links across threads, or to always draw on at least two different posts in making their contributions. The general point to make here is that the examination of the interactional practices of students can be used by educators to reflect on the appropriateness of those practices for the educational aims, and to think of how their educational instructions and activities may be designed in order to either encourage or discourage particular sorts of practices.

But the analysis has wider implications than this as it relates centrally to the matter of academic literacies. This paper has examined the ways in which the modality of written discourse is used as a medium for postgraduate educational discourse. It has shown, amongst other matters, how particular discourse markers (such as punctuation, the use of italics and bold, and branching mechanisms) are used as resources for the construction of meaning. Distinctive text-based discourse strategies create distinctive opportunities for new modes of meaning making, and, consequently, potentially represent departures from both established academic writing practices and face-to-face conversation practices.

The increasingly common practice of incorporating these forms of written

discourse as a central medium of educational discussion (Brown et al, 2005) has significant implications for the organisation and management of learning and teaching in higher education. Writing is becomes *both* a mechanism for presenting assessed materials *and* the medium for educational exchange. On the one hand, a closer alignment between the mode of assessment and participation is potentially very valuable, as students can become practiced in their assessment mode (Biggs, 2004). However, the fine-grain interactional skills that constitute this practice of online participation remain largely unexplicated. There are a number of important questions that need to be addressed before the implications of the shift to online modes of discussion can be fully understood: What are the particular discursive practices that participants utilise in online learning environments? How do these discourses relate to established academic practices? To what extent do emerging online discourse structures in other environments, such as fan forums compare with academic modes of online discourse? How are discussion boards subsequently put to use as educational resources? All of these questions are, I suggest, best dealt with through a close investigation of the discourse practices that they constitute. While conversation analysis cannot address them all, the analysis of discourse is dependent on useful conceptual resources – as this paper has sought to suggest, conversation analysis offers some interesting possibilities for conducting this analysis.

However, while I have demonstrated that there is a role to play for CA in this

endeavour, there are clearly some limitations in the approach. The analysis showed that there were potential ambiguities arising from the ways that the posts were represented as topically and functionally linked to one another. The VLE's structure of representing relationships between posts though titles, branches and other means created some tension between readable interactional intentions and software specified posting relationships. In conversation analysis an interactional 'problem' is only defined as such where it can be shown that the members' of that conversation treat it as problematic, by, for instance, clarifying points, repairing mistakes, or asking further questions. In the discussion posts analysed above the 'problem' that I have identify did not coincide with any such forms of repair work by the participants, and it is therefore inappropriate to treat them as representations of *participants'* problems. Rather, these must be considered as an *analysts'* problems.

The problems of ambiguity in the design of headings and branching relates to a broader issue about the lack of evidence available to analysts in online discussions. Online discourse does not contain the same level of interactional evidence as spoken discourse does. In face-to-face ~~posts~~contexts, conversational turns are constructed and managed in real-time, and can be examined to see how they are designed, and the ways in which their design is subsequently managed by the other participants. In online asynchronous discussion, the *process* of designing posts is missing, as they are designed

prior to being posted. Analysts do not have access to the practices by which that text was put together. The ambiguity highlighted above is a result of this.

Clearly then, the wholesale adoption of CA as an analytic approach for examining online asynchronous discourse is not appropriate. The aim of examining 'talk in conversation' becomes very problematic when the resources and practices that go into its construction are largely invisible. However, there is, I suggest, an important role that the conceptual orientation to the production of 'sense' can play. By orientating to the practices through which participants create a visible 'reading path' through the online discourse, researchers can reveal some very important affordances of online learning technology, and their implications for learning and teaching practice.

In summary then, this paper has shown that the application of Conversation Analysis to online asynchronous discourse can reveal interesting features of the ways in which that interaction is managed. This analysis has important implications not only for the pedagogic organisation of discussion boards, but also for broader educational issues, like the alignment between mode of participation and assessment, and the literacies of academic participation. However, there are also clearly some important limitations to this analytic approach that arise from some quite fundamental differences in the interactional spaces of asynchronous and face-to-face discourse. More research in this area will help to explore the ways in which existing

approaches such as CA can be used to examine online educational interaction.

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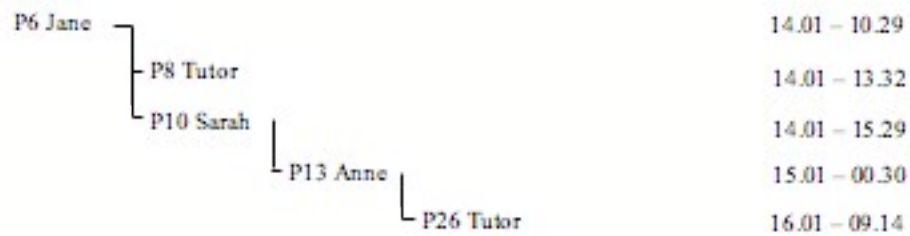
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Figures and Extracts

Figure 1

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P6 Jane ┐                                    14.01 – 10.29
        └ P8 Tutor                           14.01 – 13.32
        └ P10 Sarah ┐                        14.01 – 15.29
                    └ P13 Anne ┐             15.01 – 00.30
                               └ P26 Tutor   16.01 – 09.14
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Extract 1

Forum: G. H. Mead	Times Read: 21

Date: 01-14-2006 10:29

Author: JANE

Subject Question about the reading

How does individual action influence group action? What is the role of 'autonomy' or 'self determination' for example in Mead's account of the social construction of meaning?

Extract 2

Forum: G. H. Mead

Date: 01-14-2006 13:32

Author: TUTOR

Subject Re: Question about the reading

Great Questions, would anyone like to have a stab at answering these?

Extract 3

Forum: G. H. Mead

Date: 01-14-2006 15:29

Author: SARAH

Subject Re: Question about the reading

Blumer emphasises the idea that individual *devise* a response on the basis of their interpretation of a message or gesture of another person (see for example the last paragraph on page 28). Moreover, "[e]ven after grasping the meaning of the indication as intended by the person making it, one may decide to respond differently to it" (p. 28). Here then is recognition of the autonomy or self-determination of individuals in symbolic interactionism.

Beginning page 34, Blumer explains why it is inaccurate to say that the joint action of people who are interacting with one another is a product of social structure. From this we can deduce an answer to the question of the place of autonomy in social interaction. Blumer distinguishes between ritualized and conventionalized interaction "in which interaction is rigidly charted and followed" and interactions that are fluid and open to "flexible and new responses". He cites as an example adversarial interactions where individuals "exercise ingenuity, judgement, and discretion"--that is, they act autonomously.

But this seems to me to be an incomplete account of autonomy in social interaction. What makes the exercise of autonomy in social interaction possible (and/or impossible)? I have trouble accepting the symbolic interactionists' suggestion that social structures (of particular interest to me are power relations) cannot or do not explain what happens in social interactions....

Extract 4

I am trying to think around your *trouble accepting the symbolic interactionists' suggestion that social structures (of particular interest to me are power relations) cannot or do not explain what happens in social interactions....* as I too was struck by this suggestion and have been trying to rehearse the argument being made.

It seems to me that the starting point has to be that is important to look beyond the idea of social interaction as a medium or forum for action/conduct and to explore the characteristics of social interaction in their own right. In so doing we then get to the argument on pages 32/33 that the conduct of participants can only be understood in terms of the interaction and that joint action of participants in a product of the interaction and not the creation of a social structure. This idea is then developed and at the bottom of page 35 there is a useful sentence suggesting that responses are forged to meet the needs of the situation and not necessarily to comply with established rules. This might be helpful if considering the power relations dimension. To use the 'robber' analogy - the robber is in the position of power - his gesture 'hands up' indicates the desired (and anticipated response) and the anticipated end point (you comply, put your hands up, I take the money...) However, the person under threat , (assuming a shared understanding of the meaning of the gesture), still has the option of devising their response and acting compliantly or in some other way. So the elderly farmer who responds by attacking the robber has forged his own response to meet the needs of the situation, does not comply with societies exposed rules, and makes the front page of the tabloids.

Extract 5

Forum: G. H. Mead

Date: 01-16-2006 09:14

Author: Tutor

Subject Re: Question about the reading

[Anne] you elegantly note that "responses are forged to meet the needs of the situation and not necessarily to comply with established rules" . This is a nice way of putting the matter I think. The *understandings of* the situation frame social action, and provide ways of orientating to the situation, but they are not causal, and through our interpretation and through following our own drives and by responding to our own contextually specific contingencies. Importantly, we create our own strategies of action through this kind of dialogue between our own desires and our understandings of social 'rules' and expectations/knowledge of general rules and local contexts. Mead refers to this dialogue of self motives and orientation to our knowledge of expectations as a dialogue between 'I' amd 'Me'

I guess the term 'strategy' is pretty key here. Social action is portraid in a very instrumental kind of a way in this picture. Is this OK I wonder....