

## **"Place": Classrooms and Cyberspace--A Discourse Analysis of How Place Shapes Interaction and Learning**

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**Abstract: This is a cross-environmental study focusing on how interactants in two distinct learning settings communicate and engage in course-related planning and problem solving-activities as members of their particular academic community. One setting is a face-to-face class; the second is the identical course offered on-line. The primary methodological approach is discourse analysis.**

The concept of "place" can be exceptionally simple and yet at the same time quite complex. It can designate geographic areas from nations to villages, social communities from organizations to neighborhoods, and even concepts related to exterior and interior aspects of physical space. It may imply concrete, physical bounds, abstract borders, or limitless expanses in space as well as time. From a more complex perspective, "place" has recently been considered as an important area of social analysis; "place" is political and deeply related to issues of power and identity (Harvey, 1992; Wilson, 2000a and 2000b).

Wilson (2000a and 2000b) emphasizes the importance of place in the field of adult education in the political sense, pointing out the crucial relationship between place, identity, and power as they affect learners in a continuing professional education program. Using some of Wilson's ideas as a basic foundation, this paper expands the concept of the mutual relationship between place and identity and investigates how that relationship plays out in learning environments in adult education.

This paper represents Phase I of a large scale on-going project which focuses on the interrelationships between "place" and interaction (Hyun, in progress). Specifically, we are examining two different learning settings for an identical introductory course on adult education offered at a large Northeastern university. One context involves a face-to-face, co-present classroom; the second involves the same course offered on-line through the university's distance education program. Crucially, in concert with Wilson's (2000b) argument, we will demonstrate that place indeed matters, in terms of how participants (both students and instructors) in these programs communicate with each other, share knowledge, and construct and re-construct their identities as members of a learning community. More importantly, we will demonstrate how "place" influences interaction and the processes of learning.

In this paper, we define "place," or more specifically "learning place," as the site in which interactants exchange ideas, information, and knowledge; share and discuss narratives of

personal experience; provide directives, suggestions, and opinions; and engage in planning and problem solving activities, while at the same time forming and re-forming their personal identities as members of their particular academic community. We also treat the concept of "time" as an element inextricably related to "place."

### **Methodology, Design, and Data**

This phase of the study is entirely qualitative in nature, and is based on discourse analysis as its primary methodological and analytic tool. Our approach to discourse analysis, while inherently a qualitative method of research, does not necessarily fit into the five 'traditions' commonly discussed in much of the literature on qualitative research, i.e., biography, phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and case study (see Creswell, 1998 and others). Although each of these five traditions is driven by different goals and concentrates on different areas of focus, what seems to underlie them all is an interest in and attention to language-language as it is used in stories, interviews, narratives, conversation, and so on. That is, all five use "talk" as a medium of analysis and all are based on some aspect of empirical observation in order to understand or describe a particular phenomenon or experience.

However, the type and nature of the observations and the depth and degree to which language or "talk" is analyzed in these traditions differ significantly from our approach. Further, what we consider as 'data' is the talk and the language itself.

As noted, the paper focuses on two different learning settings, one is a face-to-face classroom, and the second, the identical course offered on-line. It is a graduate level course taught during the same semester (i.e., Fall, 2000). Each class was taught by a different instructor, and each had an enrollment of approximately 20-25 students. The data for the project consist of a variety of instances of language use. For the face-to-face class, we placed a video camera in the corner of the room in order to record as much of the actual interaction as possible. The camera was turned on just prior to the start of the class and was not turned off until minutes following the ending of the class, which assured us continuous recording of all activities. We also used supplementary audio equipment to record some of the small group discussions. In all, we collected approximately 21 hours of classroom interaction (i.e., seven full class meetings), distributed nearly evenly throughout the semester (two consecutive meetings at the beginning of the semester, three consecutive meetings in the middle, and two consecutive meetings toward the end of the semester).

The data for the on-line version consist of hardcopy print-outs of all course postings including class forum postings, lesson contents, and chat room. Additionally, for both settings we distributed survey questionnaires to all class members and conducted one-on-one interviews with a number of volunteer participants to supplement and enrich our observations.

All oral data are transcribed according to the transcription conventions of Conversation Analysis (Atkinson and Heritage, 1984). This allows us to capture the utterances in the same sequential order and with the same prosodic features as they were produced. That is, the conventions allow us to indicate conversational turns by the interactants as well as to graphically note pauses and their approximate lengths, volume shifts, false starts, hedges and hesitation markers, rising and

falling intonation, pitch peaks, overlapping speech, and even laughter. The use of the videotape allows us to also capture relevant non-verbal behavior such as eye gaze, posture, gestures, and other context-relevant issues that would not otherwise be recoverable through the use of audio equipment alone.

Using discourse analysis (Schiffrin, 1994; Chafe, 1994; Brown and Yule, 1983) as our primary methodological approach, we demonstrate just how and to what degree "place" influences communication among participants. Our approach to discourse analysis is based on the detailed, in-depth examination of spontaneous language use in interaction, with a particular emphasis on how language choice reflects speaker stance, understanding, and identity (Clark, 1996; Ochs, 1996; Goodwin, 1994).

This type of systematic, micro-level attention to language has revealed a number of linguistic patterns in each setting which elucidate how the notions of time and space, hence "place," constrain communication and ultimately influence the process of learning.

Phase I of this project focuses on the collaborative nature of planning and problem solving in each setting. By isolating the scope of inquiry to this particular activity type across two distinct learning environments, we are able to compare and contrast participants' use of language and determine with some degree of precision how "place" and its concomitant elements of space and time influence the ways in which this activity is interactively accomplished.

### **Place and its Influence on Language**

In the data analyzed thus far, we find an inverse relationship between range of language use and spatio-temporal boundaries. That is, in the on-line cyberspace class, which is virtually free of delimited meeting times and meeting places, language use appears remarkably narrow and focused. On the other hand, in the face-to-face classroom setting, with actual physical partitions, configurational limitations of desks, chairs, black/white boards, etc., and pre-set temporal bounds, participants' use of language is broad, and virtually limitless. In essence, the existence or non-existence of spatio-temporal boundaries appears to significantly impact the ways in which participants communicate with each other, especially in the areas of planning and problem solving.

For the purpose of the present paper, we will consider as a "plan" the set of activities or strategies that interactants engage in with a view to fulfill a particular course-related goal. Here, the goal could be a longer-term objective such as an explicit requirement noted in the syllabus, or it could be related to the resolution of some immediate problem that impedes or otherwise frustrates the accomplishment of a designated activity.

Problems and potential problems in the on-line course are generally dealt with step by step in a highly systematic and sequential manner. The scope of the talk is confined to an immediate problem at hand that participants deal with using a limited range of linguistic markers and communicative strategies; procedural steps are explicitly delineated, and tense marking seems to focus largely on the future. Conversely, in the face-to-face setting, we find that participants tend to alternate freely through various topics and issues, including the appeal to past time narratives of personal experience, in an attempt to plan for future work as well as to resolve current and

potential problems. The relevance of past-time narratives of personal experience to future events and future-time experience has been discussed at length in Ochs (1994).

Example (1) below, excerpted from the first week of on-line interaction, represents a typical use of future tense marking by the instructor. These early communications tend to center on the instructor's plans and expectations for the course. In this and earlier postings, the instructor is continuously attempting to make the students feel comfortable in this medium of learning and interaction. Postings are replete with greetings, reassurances, and positive expectations for the near future ('A hearty welcome to Adult Learning 404', 'be patient - it will all work out and you will soon be feeling quite comfortable in this environment;' 'I am expecting a GREAT semester together.').

*(1) Instructor to students (week 1, 8/22/00)*

Instructor: ...Starting with lesson two, **you will be posting to forums** that only **your assigned section (and me) will have access to-you will not see the forum of the other** section. I wanted to make this clear so you would know what happened to the other class members who will seem to "disappear" after the first class lesson. Also, some turnover is common in the first week or two-new people being added, some dropping, etc. By the third week the sections should be fairly stable and **you will really get to know one another**.

Here, we find the instructor in the midst of a problem solving stretch of discourse. The problem at hand centers on large enrollments and the solution was to split the class into two sections. What the instructor is conveying to the students in this excerpt is the logistical solution to the problem, his reassurance that the solution will work, as well as his anticipation of students' potential apprehension or confusion that may arise as a result of this change

The language, in this and other excerpts, is tightly focused on the present situation and how it relates to future outcomes. Future tense marking in this excerpt expresses a high degree of certainty and occurs predominantly with the collective pronoun 'you,' designating all students in the section; moreover, the 'you will' construction also co-occurs with verbs of high agency ('you will be posting,' 'you will not see,' 'you will really get to know one another.'). The instructor is anticipating confusion and apprehension on the part of the students should they log in and find some names missing or some new names that they do not recognize, and is thus attempting to reassure students and allay their concerns before they even arise.

In sharp contrast, example (2) below, excerpted from the face-to-face class, illustrates a different tendency in and purpose for tense marking. This excerpt is taken from an early class meeting in which students are discussing their plans for carrying out one of the course requirements (i.e., the visitation report). For this assignment, students are expected to visit an adult education site, interview the director, read the site's literature, and submit a short paper on that visit.

Example (3) - Class meeting #2, dataset 1

[transcription conventions:

weh<sup>re</sup>: ^ designates a pitch peak  
wha- - designates a false start or a truncated  
utterance  
out underline, designates vocal stress  
ho::pe : (colon) designates a sound stretch  
(.) / (0.8) micropause/timed pause, in seconds]

John: Uh:m (1.0) Jen an' I:: were going ta loo<sup>k</sup> at thee uh- we're both in the compu<sup>ter</sup>  
Field—we're gonna look at the West Hills School of Business and Technology.  
(skipped lines of transcript))

Instructor: **I wa<sup>nt</sup> to: me<sup>ntion</sup>, n- n- o<sup>ne</sup> of the- (0.8) the (0.6) unspo<sup>ken</sup> (0.6) goals  
for doing these vi<sup>sits</sup> is that we ho::pe to start establishing ohh some  
relationships with thi<sup>s</sup> institution for our students to do their inter<sup>ns</sup>hips.**  
(1.2) So when you go ou::<sup>t</sup> there, it's ve<sup>ry</sup> impor<sup>tant</sup> that you condu<sup>ct</sup> yourself  
profe<sup>ssionally</sup>.

**A::nd uh it is (1.0) my<sup>e</sup> experience in Indiana (.) and in New Jersey that thi<sup>s</sup>  
is ve<sup>ry</sup> impor<sup>tant</sup>—I mean it o<sup>pened</sup> a lot of doo<sup>rs</sup> for our stu<sup>dents</sup> in  
ou:r pro:<sup>gram</sup>. (1.0) A<sup>ctually</sup>( 0.4) i::n- in Ithaca (0.4) three<sup>e</sup> out of uh:: (1.8)  
the- the eightee<sup>n</sup> students who were in my la<sup>st</sup> cla<sup>ss</sup> (.) ended up getting jo<sup>bs</sup>  
(.) in the same organizations (.) so it's impo::<sup>rtant</sup> you see::<sup>e</sup> it as something  
just beyo<sup>nd</sup> you doing an assignment.**

(1.6)

Instructor: Who<sup>e</sup> e<sup>lse</sup> wants to: tell us (.) what they're going to be doing.

In contrast with the on-line setting, what we see in this and other excerpts is a freedom to shift back and forth in time, from future to present to past, on the basis of the on-going talk. As students discuss their plans for carrying out this assignment, the instructor spontaneously reacts to comments and interjects past-time narratives of personal experience to express broader aspects of his goals that had not been mentioned previously. That is, in this learning place in which real time unfolds among co-present interactants, talk is freely produced in immediately sequential turns, whether it relates squarely to the issue at hand or is only tangentially relevant. This type of spontaneous temporal shift, especially with regard to narratives of past personal experience and their relationships to future outcomes are rather frequent in the face-to-face data.

In sum, in just these two excerpts we can preliminarily discern interactants' (especially instructors') perspectives with respect to their own identities and roles in the two learning places under investigation. Further, we can see just to what degree space and time influence language use in interaction. In the on-line course, the instructor perceives students' sense of unease and perhaps aloneness out in space, and thus makes repeated attempts at reassuring them and at building their confidence in the system as well as in themselves, in addition to establishing an exceptionally salient sense of solidarity. In the classroom setting, by virtue of being confined to shared time and shared space, talk flows in a multiplicity of directions to accomplish a multiplicity of purposes.

## Implications

Theoretically, the notion of "place" in adult education is an under-investigated area. Going beyond Wilson, this study analyses the actual process by which interaction/language and identity are shaped by place. The study suggests that there are significant differences in the range of language use and spatio-temporal boundaries between the face-to-face and on-line course. We hope that this study will add a new dimension and perspective to previous research on the topic of face-to-face vs. on-line learning. The majority of existing research on this topic tends to focus on such macro level aspects as learning/program effectiveness, overall student satisfaction, attrition rates, and so forth (Barry and Runyan, 1995; Wilkes and Burnham, 1991). By concentrating on actual language use, we demonstrate through specific linguistic examples precisely how place influences interaction and learning. The paper presents an alternative methodological research approach to issues in adult education by combining micro level analysis to better inform macro level concerns.

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