Preface

This book is about discussion. It is largely about discussion on the Internet, but it will also raise to consciousness questions about discussion in person. The book calls us to step back and ask many questions about what we normally see but do not notice in discussion:

- What do we get out of discussion?
- What do we put into discussion?
- When does discussion work?
- What could we mean by discussion working?
- Does discussion online meet our expectations?
- What can we do to improve discussion?

This book should help you to think about the process and the quality of discussion.

Cases on Online Discussion and Interaction: Experiences and Outcomes is filled with examples of online discussions in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes. By looking at instances of online discussion, we are better able to speculate about how it works. After reading the case studies, the reader should have a better idea of what is likely to facilitate discussion online, what is likely to encourage collaborative meaning-making, what is likely to encourage productive, supportive, engaged discussion, and what is likely to foster critical thinking. The aim is to draw together in one book, chapters dealing with an array of research methods, online communication media, forms of expression, communication contexts, and philosophical perspectives. The cases observe online discussion in education, the workplace, support groups, politics, social networking, with groups and dyads, in public and private settings. Often, authors will find it useful to compare the online discussion to the more traditional face-to-face discussion. Hence, this book should help us better understand the traditional face-to-face discussion, too. In short, we want to examine discussion with the aim of making it better.

Here is what you will find in each chapter:

TEACHING

Shedletsky’s chapter (Does Online Discussion Produce Increased Interaction and Critical Thinking?) reviews the literature on critical thinking in online discussion in the context of the online college course.
It employs the experimental method to test for the amount of student-to-student interaction and the type of interaction, as defined in critical thinking terms. It presents five experimental studies of instructional media and instructional methods. As the first chapter in the book, it sets a tone for seeking to develop a theory of online discussion. It just begins to open that door, with a hint of understanding what is likely to influence students to collaborate and to do more than just post and flee.

Schwartzman and Morrissey (Collaborative Student Groups and Critical Thinking in an Online Basic Communication Course) examine student use of critical thinking as students worked on problem solving. They looked at three sections of a course over a year and categorized student posts for levels of critical thinking. They speculate on the group dynamics that may lead to disappointing levels of critical thinking or higher levels and take us closer to understanding how it works and what teachers might do to improve online discussions. You may want to read this chapter in close connection with the Shedletsky chapter.

Guthrie and McCracken (Promoting Reflective Discourse through Connectivity: Conversations around Service-Learning Experiences) report on ways in which course assignments attempt to facilitate community development, trust, interpersonal connectivity, collaboration and experientially-based critical reflection. Students were engaged in service-learning experiences and interacted with peers and instructors in a virtual environment designed to facilitate reflection, support and collective discovery.

Withers, Leonard & Sherblom (Classrooms Without Walls—Teaching Together in Second Life) report on the use of a virtual classroom project—text or voiced synchronous online discussion with visual three-dimensional space, involving students from three geographically distanced universities, in which students collaborate on an involved project, requiring students “. . .to create an agenda; assign group roles and tasks; research a non-profit organization; describe its goals, multiple audiences, and needs; describe a proposal for assisting the non-profit through some participation in Second Life; and develop a rationale explaining the ways in which this proposal meets the organization’s objectives.” The chapter reports on both the challenges and successes of the project, offering lessons learned.

Palmer and Holt (Online Discussion in Engineering Education—Student Responses and Learning Outcomes) offer a close analysis of the effects of requiring students to reflect on course material and to comment on fellow student postings each week on a course discussion board. Based on a number of behavioral measures and survey data, this study indicates that this simple assignment does produce beneficial effects on student satisfaction and learning.

Sideri (B-log on Social Change and Educational Reform: The Case of a University Class in Greece) chronicles the use of blogs in a college course, Cyberspace and Diasporic Media, with 20 advanced students. The chapter seeks to determine whether or not assigned blogging could foster critical thinking, collaborative knowledge and re-personalization of education. Students wrote on assigned questions or topics. The chapter offers the teacher’s observations on how students responded to the media in terms of function, writing, language use, student-to-student dynamics, and assessment. The chapter reflects upon the dynamics of the classroom as it is challenged by new technologies and also the challenges and dynamics of university education in an interconnected world, the relationship of multiliteracies to social-political interconnections.

Burden and Atkinson (“De-Coupling Groups in Space and Time”: Evaluating New Forms of Social Dialogue for Learning) invite us to think with them about “. . .the potential learning value of a particular technology (affordances). . .” not solely in terms of how the technology functions but also in terms of the user’s imagination and creativity. While the chapter uses Voice Thread as a discussion application, it concentrates on pedagogical affordances of technology. Drawing upon undergraduate and postgraduate students in continuing professional development in education, this chapter reports on the students’
experience of online communication, what facilitates discussion online. The chapter points us toward thinking about what students do with technology.

**LANGUAGE AND COMMUNICATION PROCESSES**

Kehrwald (Towards More Productive Online Discussions: Social Presence and the Development of Interpersonal Relations) furthers our quest for a theory of online discussion by asking two key questions: (1) How does social presence aid in the development of relations between actors in online learning environments? and (2) How is this beneficial to online discussion and interaction? Using an extended interview method, this chapter adds to our understanding of the interpersonal dynamics involved in online discussion, e.g., trust, feelings of safety and respect.

Beers Fagersten (Using Discourse Analysis to Assess Social Co-Presence in the Video Conference Environment) takes us into the synchronous, multimodal video conference with professionals in the workplace. In part this chapter explores the significance of using naturally occurring language as opposed to, say, experimental data, to study social co-presence. The chapter considers the multimodal conference to face-to-face communication and gives us some appreciation for what is likely to increase the sense of “the other as being perceived as present.”

Filipi and Lissonet (Investigating the Online Interactions of a Team of Test Developers Working in a Wiki Environment) give us a close look at the online collaboration of experts developing a test in order to (1) compare the online, asynchronous communication to face-to-face, and (2) uncover how expertise is displayed online. Filipi and Lissonet use the method of conversation analysis to get at matters of structure and identity in the online interactions of experts working together.

Markman (A Close Look at Online Collaboration: Conversational Structure in Chat and its Implications for Group Work) employs conversation analysis in an educational context to examine the interaction in synchronous chat during teamwork, with a focus on how coherence is maintained in this fast paced environment. The chapter compares talk online to talk face-to-face in terms of things like turn taking and making sense out of utterances. Markman has useful suggestions for the teacher planning to use chat for online discussions.

Chovanec (Online Discussions and Interaction: The Case of Live Text Commentary) focuses on a type of reporting in which live sports events are reported as the audience engages in online discussion and interaction during the construction of the text. The chapter offers a sociolinguistic approach to this emerging genre, treating closely the use of language, dialogic structure and interpersonal interaction, with attention to the display of identity. The chapter goes a ways towards locating this novel genre against the background of mass media. We see the melding of report of information with interpersonal debate. The chapter does a close reading on ways in which this genre highlights certain features not present in traditional mass media, how layers of meaning reside in the new genre. Humorous and competitive interactions are discussed in gender terms with the notion of male “gossip.”

Toles Patkin (Online Interpersonal Interactions Utilizing an Extremely Limited Communication Interface) looks at the communication that goes on during an online backgammon game in which the player is extremely limited to four factors: (a) level of play, (b) language selected, (c) chat interface, and (d) and game play. Users select from a list of 27 preloaded comments to discuss with one another and the choice is translated into the language chosen by each receiver. This case is an exercise in discovering just how much is communicated within the framework of a limited system for communicating.
The chapter pays special attention to the attribution of identity under circumstances of highly limited information available.

Wang (Democratic Deliberation in Online Consultation Forums: A Case Study of the Casino Debate in Singapore) considers the possibility of civic engagement online in the discussion of political issues. Will the Internet promote greater citizen involvement, interaction between citizen’s and government, online consultation? Using content analysis, the chapter investigates the degree to which Singapore’s online consultation forum reflects the ideals of democratic deliberation. The study employed a set of criteria for democratic deliberation to analyze discussion forum messages. Such criteria as autonomy, transparency, equal participation, privacy and anonymity were applied to the data. Both structure and content were described, with such variables as frequency of posts, interactions among users, post length, date of post, number of users, issues discussed, critical assessment of issues, and tone of message, pro or anti-government. With regard to democratic deliberation, the results are mixed. Some solutions are recommended.

Lapadat, Atkinson, & Brown (What We Do Online Everyday: Constructing Electronic Biographies, Constructing Ourselves) chronicle the individual literacy biographies of children five to fifteen years old, collecting data on their online interactivity as they develop. They explore the question of what it means to be literate by viewing the practices and tools of children and adolescents. The children and their parents were interviewed in their homes as they showed the researchers their typical literacy materials and activities, printed and technologically mediated. This study points to the changing nature of literacy and to its individual character, hence the unique digital fingerprints.

SUPPORT

Ginossar (“There’s Always Hope:” Content, Participants, and Dynamics in Online Discussion in a Lung Internet Cancer Support Group) shows us how people talk to one another in an online cancer support group, documenting (1) content, (2) participants, (3) topics, and (4) and messages that were absent or “silenced.” Using a triangulation of methods, this chapter describes support group discussion and offers a good understanding of the importance of these discussions.

Flanigan (“Change” Talk at iVillage .com) uses ethnography of communication to analyze a woman-centered Internet site, focusing on talk about relationship troubles. This chapter describes communication practices women use in an attempt to answer the question, “What are the dominant ways members negotiate relationship troubles?” It takes talk about relationship change as a prominent cultural symbol that allows for insights into rules for communicating. This chapter touches on theoretically promising topics such as self-disclosure online and anonymity.

Scott, Lewis & D’Urso (Getting on the “E” List: Email List Use in a Community of Service Provider Organizations for People Experiencing Homelessness) gather data on a large number of organizations over a four-year period as they attempt to network. The focus is on an email list in a non-profit network of organizations dedicated to service for the homeless. The study was interested in the reasons that people used or didn’t use the email list; how the email list was used; and the consequences of use or nonuse of the email list. The researchers collected data from recorded logs, an online survey, face-to-face interviews and from attending meetings and events. They report on how the use of technology added to the sense of “we-ness” and connections in the community of users. The attitudes of nonusers were equally significant to understand. Several recommendations for organizational leaders grow out of these findings.
Black, Bute, & Russell (“The Secret is Out!” Supporting Weight Loss Through Online Discussion) examine how social support is communicated in an online weight loss community website. The chapter compares the communication of social support in the online journals and the discussion forums by analyzing journal entries and discussion forum comments. Interestingly, the nature of support expressed in discussion forums differs from support given in response to journals. Other key differences between discussion in the journals and in the forums are found in how communicators address their audience and the use of double interacts. This chapter gives organizers and site designers for online support groups important ideas to think about.

As you read each chapter, you will learn about how online discussion was carried out under specific conditions and you will learn of outcomes. It is our hope that these cases will enhance your understanding of online discussion. We believe that the very act of critically focusing on discussion will foster greater understanding and will help us become better at taking part in discussion.