Chapter XIII
Higher Order Thinking in Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

This research studies higher order thinking (HOT) processes in asynchronous discussions situated in a campus-based course that involved 11 pairs of graduate students. In these discussions, students examined assessment strategies used for teaching purposes, jointly in one week. Taking a grounded theory approach, messages derived from discussions were analyzed with qualitative and quantitative analyses. The unit of analysis was concept. Thinking acts were categorized into communication sequences of initiation, response, and comment. These sequences were further categorized with a five-dimension taxonomy derived from the patterns of these acts observed. Statistical analysis was used to observe the frequency of these categories and to validate the categorization consistency among coders. The results strongly suggest that HOT emerges when existing ideas are expanded and changed, and when ideas are expanded, new concepts emerge as these ideas are pondered from a wider perspective. The implication is that online discussion is an effective learning activity when students participate.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is about higher order thinking (HOT), that is, learning to think, which is considered to be an important outcome of collaborative problem solving (Brown, 1994; Greeno, 1998). In most psychological theories, for example, information processing, cognition is viewed as an individual person’s mental operation rather than a social process. The study of HOT is not an exception. Flavell (1979) examines metacognition and cognitive monitoring as a cognitive development of individuals. Creativity is studied as processing and transforming information into new knowledge in an individual’s mind (e.g., Guilford, 1975; Reitman, 1966). This implies that theories about HOT seldom interact with the social aspect of learning.

In contrast to the traditional theories of cognition, constructivists point out that thinking is a social process in which cognition is shared, distributed, and co-constructed by individuals in a group, and by a community as a holistic effort of these individuals (e.g., Lave, 1993, 1998; Rogoff, 1998; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1999; Thomas, 2002; Wenger, 1998). HOT likely occurs as so-
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making via negotiation in a group (Bruffee, 1999; Resnick, 1993; Rogoff, 1998; Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1999). Thus, learning to think is situated in “actions of an inquiry,” for example, clarifying a problem, explaining a solution, justifying a concept, as well as selecting and presenting evidence to support a perceived meaning. In the process of collaboration, HOT emerges as personal conceptions are reasoned internally in an individual’s mind and are also pondered externally in social interaction with multiple perspectives. Thereby, HOT can be defined as a process of thinking about thinking that can be learned via conversation during collaborative inquiry.

**Dialogic Communication**

In accordance to Vygotsky’s (1997) dialogic communication, thinking is formulated in the processes of two interconnected communications. The first process is inner communication with oneself, for example, self-debate. When ideas involved in this internal communication are externalized, represented, and exchanged in a group of individuals, thinking about these ideas occurs in interpersonal communication, for example, public discussion. In this social interaction, meanings of such ideas are negotiated for an understanding. This kind of dialogic thinking is considered to be a learning conversation (Pask, 1976).

In Dewey’s (1933) term, this can be considered to be reflective thought learned from the experience in joint actions. In congruence with Dewey, Resnick (1993) and Rogoff (1998) state that most knowledge derives from an interpretation of experience that is based on schemas, which is actively shaped; changed or transformed; and influenced by the learning conversations among members in a community. Thus, the notion of joint actions conceptualizes learning to think as a collaborative process and also pinpoints dialogic interaction as a contributing factor to HOT.

The assumption is that dialogic interaction is a medium that generates higher level cognitive processes. While decisions are made upon judgment, solutions are formulated based on meaning...