Competent Web Dialogue: Thoughts Linked in Digital Conversations

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ABSTRACT

Conducting a dialogue on the Web is a matter of linking thoughts in digital conversations. This article is intended to contribute toward learning qualities in such conversations. The term “dialogue” refers to a special kind of conversation, having structure, purpose, and learning qualities. The focus is on learning Web dialogues taking place in a course context using text-based, asynchronous meetings. An overview of factors that influence digital group conversations is presented together with a model for dialogue competence face-to-face. The dialogue potential of Web dialogues is highlighted. Course leaders and teachers wanting to create opportunities for learning Web dialogues, as well as the interlocutors themselves, need to wise up on the digital interchange of thoughts as a form.

Keywords: collaborative; collective learning; conversation; dialogue competence; distance education; group; Web learning

INTRODUCTION

Conducting a dialogue on the Web is a matter of linking thoughts in digital conversations. Contacts and conversations via the computer are growing in volume. People are successively changing their understanding of what this kind of conversation is, and of its possibilities and difficulties. When conversing with others via the computer, we are moving in the border zone between solitude and company. In order to achieve learning qualities in these digital conversations, the interlocutors need to wise up on the digital interchange of thoughts as a form. This article is intended to contribute in that direction, partly by borrowing knowledge concerning group dialogue and dialogue competence in face-to-face situations. The focus of attention is on the dialogue in connection with the text-based, asynchronous meeting, and in particular on digital group conversations in connection with courses, training programs, and university education. Often, though not always, these conversations are conducted with an element of examination or with a stipulation of presence and activity. Above all, though, they are meant to be good learning conversations, that is, conversations in which people learn with and from each other. The term “dialogue” as
used in this article refers to a special kind of conversation, one having both a structure and a purpose (cf. Wilhelmson, 2006).

Digital technology has led us into new forms of conversation, and in some digital exchanges the similarity is so great that it has become natural to say that we are talking, even though we are actually writing. Different people have very different images of what communicating on the Web and at a distance implies. There are great variations of experience and competence. For example, there are generation differences, and the fact of our writing with completely different kinds of software and with different degrees of digital competence. The lack of common images, that is, similar understanding of what digital conversations can be, is an important basic precondition that will have to be taken into consideration for many more years to come. Dialogue does not come easily, even when people see and hear each other. A group dialogue requires practiced skills, but its learning potential, that is, the possibility it affords, in the company of others, of increasing one’s understanding and pondering one’s experience, makes it worth the trouble.

Two Digital Conversations by Way of Illustration

The participants in a distance course are given the task of conversing in writing with each other, by computer, about gender aspects of IT use. They are each to have read an article or a book chapter on the subject and are now to give their views on it and converse with each other in groups of about 10 people. This conversation is expected to continue for a fortnight in a conference system of the First Class type. In one group the conversation makes rather slow progress. When the participants have described the content of the article they have read, communication comes to a standstill. The course leader then intervenes to ask whether anyone has had personal experience of gender discrimination in connection with IT use, whereupon a number of participants describe experience of the kind, and others reply with affirmative comments on some of these contributions. Nothing much more happens after this.

In another group the communication gets off to a somewhat hesitant start but soon gets quite lively. In connection with describing the article, one participant relates personal experience of the subject. Another participant relates a similar experience, while a third objects that the reason must have been something other than gender discrimination. A lively conversation ensues as to what the reasons might have been. There are still some people who have not voiced an opinion, and so the person who was first to speak asks the “silent ones” to give their opinions. The conversation flows on and now gets quite heated. Someone writes that she feels insulted by the doubt cast on her story. The person who queried what she wrote apologizes and clarifies his meaning. The misunderstanding is cleared up, and the conversation continues on a frank and friendly basis.

What did the participants in the two groups learn from all this? Those in the first group presumably learned a certain amount from the articles they read and perhaps too from the summaries provided by other group members. No one, presumably, got much out of the Web talk. At worst, the participants may have come to the conclusion that electronic conversations are worthless. The other group probably learned quite a lot, both facts about gender issues and various possible perspectives on IT and gender. Perhaps they even changed their opinions about certain forms of IT use and saw greater opportunities for their own part. We shall be returning to these examples later on in this article.

Factors Influencing Digital Group Conversations

There are a large number of factors influencing the way in which a group discussion on the Web develops and how much the participants get out of it. The nature and wording of the task, the choice of subject, the size and composition of the group, and the participants’ private situation and attitude to the task make a difference to motivation and activity. This in turn makes