Understanding Innovative Professional Development for Educators through the Analysis of Intersubjectivity in Online Collaborative Dialogues

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ABSTRACT

Effectiveness of professional development is affected by the quality of social interaction. This study examines how online collaborative dialogues might influence teachers’ decisions in their classrooms—sometimes hurting when not appropriated well. This theoretical article extends principal sociocultural approaches to a cognitive concept called intersubjectivity through illustrations of empirical data. Part of a larger innovative professional development involving four classroom locations across Missouri, synchronous chatroom dialogues comprising teachers and researchers, and pre- and post-unit interviews underwent qualitative discourse and focused microanalyses. We argue that teachers purposefully used their dynamic intersubjective spaces and strategies in the management of meaning-making negotiations within an online interactive environment. The findings reveal two novel variable forms of intersubjectivity: (a) temporary suspension, and (b) resistance and disagreement. These findings inform teacher educators and practitioners of online learning about the cognitive and sociocultural processes and tension of learning within advanced interactive learning environments.

Keywords: collaborative learning; education research; education technology implementation; intersubjectivity; professional development; synchronous discussion

INTRODUCTION

Reform advocates in education have increasing interests and hopes for incorporating information and communication technology (ICT) in reforming both instructional and teacher education. These interests and hopes are important and significant. However, the outcomes of their implementation varied in the field. While some implementing groups sustained their learning, other groups did not. Drawing on a cognitive concept called intersubjectivity, this article examines the specific ways in which teacher understanding and learning were developed (or not) in online collaborative dialogues and their impact on their decisions when implementing innovative constructivist-based professional
development, between four teachers and two researchers involving four classroom locations across Missouri.

Previous studies of professional development from a dialogic perspective implementing similar reforms have proven to benefit innovative teachers. As Zeichner and Liston (1996) wrote, “The challenge and support gained through social interaction is important in helping teachers clarify what they believe and in gaining the courage to pursue their beliefs” (p. 76). To facilitate optimal learning for students with technology, teachers need considerable knowledge, effort, persistence, and self-regulation to devise, implement, and assess instructional plans and complex learning environments. In such processes, teachers’ collaborative professional development plays a critical role as they construct new understandings, through participation in their “community of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 29). The production of these communities often involved a shared practice that reflected the pursuit of learning through interacting, both with each other and with the world.

Interest in reforming education through technology has steadily increased in recent years (National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future, 2003). Research has affirmed the importance of connecting teachers and technology (e.g., Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik, & Soloway, 1998), its potential to change the future of education (e.g., Tyack & Cuban, 2004), and the powerful role of communication technology for mediating teacher education reform in sharing information and new pedagogy (Berge & Collins, 1998), fostering teacher competencies (Kabilan, 2005), and building collaborative professional development and reflective communities (e.g., Borthwick et al., 2004; Riel & Fulton, 2001).

Despite its growing prevalence and promise, questions have been raised concerning the pedagogical impact of computer-mediated dialogues on professional development from conceptual, methodological, and practice perspectives (e.g., Wade & Fauske, 2004), for two recurring reasons: (1) shallow online discourse (e.g., Putnam & Borko, 2000); and (2) teachers’ reticence to use networked peer communication (e.g., Zhao & Rop, 2001). Thus, the current claims for the contribution of communication technology remain unclear (Thompson, Bull, & Bell, 2005). Calls have also been made for research to provide guidance and support in engaging teachers in productive technology-based discourse (e.g., Gordin, Gomez, Pea, & Fishman, 1996). This study addresses this issue by examining the extent to which teacher online understanding might occur (or not) through a cognitive concept called intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity is the key concept underlying this study. The accomplishment of intersubjectivity is an important step leading to a new solution for solving problems. An example of intersubjectivity can be shown in the agreement between social participants on the placement of puzzle pieces in solving a jigsaw puzzle. In this study, intersubjectivity is defined as the common understanding as shared between social participants concerning their goals, context, action, operation of actions, use of objects, and evaluation of actions and outcomes.

Previous studies of intersubjectivity have often suggested a binary approach to understanding, meaning that the participants either maintained a shared intersubjectivity or understanding, or they did not. In contrast, the current study provides a novel dialogic approach to understanding the variable patterns, or dynamic nature of intersubjectivity, within the zone of proximal development (ZPD) in an online interactive environment (see further elaboration in the “Theoretical Perspectives” section). The ZPD here refers to the learning difference between guided and independent performance in problem-solving activity (Vygotsky, 1986). We argue for a dynamic nature of understanding that can be appropriated as a mechanism for managing intersubjectivity in a purposeful way within the ZPD, online. Against this background, we address three key research questions:
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