Chapter IX

Asynchronous Communication

A single fibre does not make a thread, nor a single tree a forest.

Ancient Chinese proverb

Introduction

This chapter is about the nature of control in asynchronous online communication. Although primarily looking at Web-based forums, by extension, many of the issues raised here apply to other forms of asynchronous group communication, including the use of email, proprietary systems like Lotus® Notes® or FirstClass®, as well as mailing lists, newsgroups, and the like. The range of asynchronous communication technologies is immense, therefore, not all types and varieties will be covered here. Other forms of asynchronous communication that provide the underpinnings of the hideously-misnamed “Web 2.0,” such as blogs and wikis, will be discussed later.

The chapter starts with a general discussion of some of the fundamental issues of control in asynchronous discussions, presents a detailed analysis of an example forum, then goes on to identify approaches to creating, moderating, and using discussion forums that enable a combination of high and low transactional control.

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Discussion forums on the Web tend to take one of two main forms. Messages are either presented linearly, in order of posting, or threaded, with each message shown in the context of its replies and what it replies to. Many, perhaps the majority, provide options for users to select which mode they prefer.

**The Apparent Parallelism of Threads**

Unlike linear dialogues where participants take turns, threaded discussions are, by nature, parallel. Each message posted may constrain or increase the choices for those who reply to it, but, as new threads branch and grow, the effect on overall choice within the system is additive. The learner may equally choose to respond to any of the preceding messages as well as those that are newly added. In principle then, it would seem that dialogues mediated through threaded forums provide a lot of learner choice in an exponentially increasing fashion as a discussion progresses. Consequently, threaded discussions might make poor vehicles for less autonomous learners, not to mention those with insufficient time to follow every thread. However, this is an over-simplistic view and several factors militate against this.

**Linearity in Parallel Threads**

Tutor control can often inhibit choice, and this is potentially a very good thing, adding structure to the branching chaos and catering better to the needs of the nervous. An online discussion forum may or may not be tightly controlled by a tutor. Certainly, those that follow the precepts of, say, Salmon (2000) or Palloff and Pratt (1999), will enable discussions that allow learners to construct and explore a body of knowledge or ideas with the teacher in a supporting, guiding role rather than the determiner of choice and sequence. Even this role involves elements of structure. Salmon’s (2000) five stage model suggests a process of letting go (a move from structure to dialogue in Moore’s terms, a move from teacher control to negotiated control in the language of transactional control). Online tutors reward, emphasise, de-emphasise, summarise, and perform numerous tasks to maintain a discussion’s momentum.
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