

# Communicating for the purpose of learning in the online environment: an analysis of student-initiated communicative acts in UWIDEC's blended learning pilot project

**Olabisi Kuboni, University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC)**

## **Abstract**

In September, 2005, the University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC) initiated a project to transform its delivery mode and adopt a blended learning approach that placed greater emphasis on asynchronous modes of communication and interaction. Previously, interpersonal communication was primarily synchronous and took place through face-to-face tutorials and audio-conferencing. The blended learning approach as implemented by UWIDEC, entails a substantial shift away from these synchronous modes towards asynchronous communication utilizing a web-based learning management system.

In recognition of the important role that communication and interaction play in the learning of the online and distance student, and also being aware that the shift described above, entails a reduction in the use of oral communication, this paper examines the communicative acts of UWIDEC learners in the new web-based environment with a view to identifying and analyzing the skills, behaviours and attitudes that they display in the new learning space.

The analysis is conducted within the framework of relevant perspectives on interaction, social presence and the online learning community.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In September 2005, the University of the West Indies Distance Education Centre (UWIDEC) initiated a project to transform its delivery to a blended learning mode that placed greater emphasis on asynchronous forms of communication and interaction (Marshall, 2004). Prior to this project, there was a small-scale initiative to incorporate a web-based component into the conventional mixed delivery mode that UWIDEC had used from its inception (Kuboni, Thurab-Nkhosi, Chen, 2002; Kuboni & Martin, 2004).

This project is significantly different from that initial effort in four important ways. First, this project is wider in scope. It was initiated with 12 courses, with a view to transforming all other existing courses in the shortest possible time. Secondly, a comprehensive training programme was undertaken for all the key agents in the undertaking. Thirdly, the project heralded a significant reduction in the use of tools and strategies for synchronous interaction. Finally, in embarking on this project, UWIDEC discontinued its use of a commercial software, and replaced it by the Open Source product, MOODLE.

One of the courses targeted for the pilot project was FOUN1101, *Caribbean Civilization*..

This paper reports on a study designed to examine communication initiated by students in the online teaching-learning environment for this course.

## **BACKGROUND**

Unlike the typical approach that combines web-based teaching-learning experiences with classroom teaching (Rovai and Jordan, 2004), blended learning, as practiced by UWIDEC, de-emphasizes synchronous interaction. Given its essential role as a distance education provider, UWIDEC's blended learning format combines two asynchronous delivery modes, namely the web-based learning management system and print-based self-study course materials. For UWIDEC, blended learning represents a significant change from the mixed delivery mode that preceded it, in that synchronous interaction tools are being replaced by technologies for asynchronous interaction. The shift has meant a significant reduction in face-to-face tutorials and audio-conferencing. A limited number of local tutorials is still

available but this feature is now optional; all compulsory tutoring activities are provided online. Similarly, the number of course coordinator-led audio-conference sessions has been considerably reduced.

A standard design was used for the construction of the web-based teaching-learning environment for all courses. In this regard, there were two categories of discussion forums. The general forums comprised

- A non-interactive forum titled *Course Coordinator Announcements*
- Two interactive discussion forums titled *General students' queries and concerns* and *Group meeting room* respectively.
- One interactive discussion forum, with restrictive access to the course coordinator and tutors only, known as the *Teachers' forum*.

The second category comprised the learning forums that made up one aspect of the Unit resources. All resources related to a particular unit, including the unit-specific learning forums, were released at specific periods over the course of the semester, typically on a weekly basis. These learning forums were defined according to the requirements of the specific course. In general though, they comprised at least one in which the tutor would present some explanation about a specific aspect of the content of the Unit, another for discussing a tutor-generated course-related topic, and a third where students would post their comments and questions about their study of the Unit in focus.

Other features of a typical course website were *Course Information*, *Course Resources*, *Assignments* and *Quizzes*

The entire enrolment of students for a given course was subdivided into groups of 20 to 25, with each group functioning as an 'online class' supported by a tutor. The course coordinator maintained oversight of the entire course through the Course Coordinator Announcements, as well as through closer interaction with all tutors in the Teachers' Forum.

Finally, on the homepage that served as a portal for the entire online space, the author of this paper, who served as project coordinator, maintained a column that was changed at regular intervals and which targeted participants of all courses.

This study seeks to examine communication from the perspective of the learner, within the discussion forum. Specifically it aims to analyse the student-initiated utterances to determine what these utterances are revealing about the nature of learner communication in the online learning space.

## METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative approach to data analysis. The data themselves were drawn from student postings in Student Queries and Concerns and the Group Meeting Room for the course Caribbean Civilization. These two forums were selected as it was envisaged that postings in them would include a high proportion of student-initiated utterances. This was considered important, given an intention to analyse communication from 'talk' that were more likely to be initiated by the students rather than given as responses to tutor-directed postings.

The method, described by Silverman (1993) for the analysis of transcripts was used to analyse these data. While the data used cannot really be defined as 'transcripts', they are viewed as sharing a key attribute of transcripts, namely that they may be considered as 'naturally occurring talk'. The method used was also consistent with Potter and Wetherell's (1987) description of discourse analysis. These writers take the view that language is action-oriented and that people use it to do things. It is this interpretation of language that they refer to as discourse. Based on this understanding, they propose an approach to discourse analysis that involves the analysis of three interrelated components within the discourse, namely function, variation and construction. Of special interest in this study, is their interpretation of function. Using the combined method described above, selected segments of the two forums identified earlier were analysed.

In light of the foregoing, this study was undertaken to address the following question:

- What is the nature of the communication originating from the learners and what do these communicative acts indicate about the characteristics of the UWIDEC online learner?

## FINDINGS

This section of the report is divided according to the types of utterances drawn from the postings of the two forums. It may be noted that many of the excerpts identified for analysis do not fit the typical type of discourse that one expects to find in forums that carry that these labels. This phenomenon will be addressed as part of the analysis.

### **Active learning**

As part of the strategy for encouraging active learning, students were advised that they should not simply state that they do not understand something but that, as far as possible, they should describe the difficulty they are encountering. While the following excerpt does not completely fit the situation just described, it includes elements of an attempt by the student to make an input into the solution that she is seeking.

Starting with what could have been a discussion topic, the student posed the following question:

What influenced the Europeans to travel to the new world? Hi, (tutor name), when answering a question along this line, should we just address the God, Gold and Glory issues OR should we make mention of all issues outlined in the text (course materials) like Bullionism, Mercantilism etc?

In this excerpt, the student has identified alternative segments of information, a feature that suggests that she is setting the stage for a dialogue on the pros and cons of each. On closer examination of the format of the question, one wonders whether she is contemplating any extended discussion or whether she is using a tactic to get the tutor to provide the 'correct answer'.

On the other hand, the posting below suggests a noticeably different learner stance. Like the previous student, this one also seems to be addressing a discussion topic and begins the posting by re-stating the topic.

How if any can we describe a Caribbean culture? To respond to this question, would it be correct to first define culture? Then state that the Caribbean has a diversified set of cultures, namely our food, festivals, our music and then extend on them?

The fundamental intent here is not to be handed the answer. Rather, the student is seeking clarification of a strategy for undertaking the learning task. The tutor is therefore being asked, as a first step, to address the strategy being proposed. Even in dealing with the content, what is offered here, appears to be the student's own formulation, based on the content as presented in the course materials, rather than a direct extraction from the materials. I would argue that this posting tends more towards active learning, with the student treating the discourse between himself and the tutor as a process, rather than as a static question-answer exchange.

### **Self-evaluation**

This tendency towards active learning is also detected in a posting that seems to be the culmination of an interaction between tutor and learner, and which, at this point, sees the learner assuming the role of evaluator of her own work. Her evaluation seems to be based on criteria previously. The posting is as follows:

(Tutor name), thanks for your assistance during this course. The persons in my interview were from (countries named). Thanks for all the comments. I hope I was able to successfully put the points on paper in a clear and concise manner.

The remark, 'Thanks for your comments', preceded by 'thank you for your assistance during the course', suggests that leading up to this communicative act, the exchanges between student and tutor had put the student on a path of formulating criteria for assessing the interview. Thus, when she concludes with the hope that she had 'put the points on paper in a clear and concise manner', it is likely that this was one of the guidelines previously set for conducting and reporting on an interview. While this utterance may not necessarily reflect a high level of competence in terms of self-evaluation, it demonstrates a clear leaning in that direction.

### **Knowledge-building**

One of the features of the online teaching-learning environment that is frequently highlighted, is that it is designed to support a constructivist approach to teaching and learning. The excerpt given below shows some evidence of an orientation to this approach to learning. She asserts,

I am a national (of a named Caribbean country); convince me from an economical, policy, social and political perspective, why I, as part of the Caribbean, need to be part of the Caribbean Common Market.

By personalizing her engagement with the topic being discussed, she is demonstrating some of the essential tenets

of constructivism: that learning is a personal interpretation of the world, that it is meaning-making and that the learner must develop ownership of the knowledge being acquired.

Notwithstanding the above, one may also argue that the constructivist orientation is only partially evident and that at the core, the student's approach may still be shaped by the information-transmission mode. Her command to the tutor to convince her of the benefits of membership in the CCM can be regarded as a mechanism to place herself in the position of a recipient of information, while other parts of the utterance suggest that she is functioning within the constructivist paradigm.

Another posting that demonstrates an inclination to constructivism, is one that raises questions about the region's claim to having a cultural identity:

Why do we as Caribbean beings think it necessary to `mimic' extra-regional accents? Is it a show of appeasement or lack of cultural identity?

What this latter utterance adds to the discourse is the introduction of experiential knowledge. As far as this student is concerned, the mimicking of extra-regional accents must be taken into account as one seeks to define Caribbean cultural identity. Even if they do not yet show the capability to do more than set a framework, both students are showing a movement towards constructivist practices.

### **Communicating in anonymity**

One cannot underestimate the fact that, for the majority of students, communicating online is a completely new experience. In stating her query about the undue delay in the grades being returned, the student ended the posting with the plea,

So anyone who is reading this and is in a position to help, please do.

What this exhortation suggests is that the student does not seem to have the confidence that her message will be received and acted on. The fundamentals of the communication process are being seriously questioned. Linked to this lack of confidence in the process is the inability to establish the identity of the recipient of the message. That entity is simply `anyone who is reading this'. Thus the final plea `please do' seems to carry with it a sense in which the individual herself is experiencing a loss of identity and personal empowerment.

While for this student, the learning community does not appear to have any meaning, for another, the exact opposite seems to be the case. Not only is the communication process maintained, but there has been a radical redefining of roles. In order to clearly show the new role the student has assumed, both parts of the exchange between two students is presented here. The focus of interest is Student B.

*Student A:* First of all, sorry I was unable to participate in the forum earlier. This was due to illness on my part. However I am OK now, so I would like to know if my assignment goes over by 10 words extra, would I be penalized?

Would it be too late for me to discuss Unit 3 - with regard to the sugar plantation?

*Student B:* Good night. Glad to hear that you feel much better now. To answer your question, yes, you will be penalized if you go over the required amount. I had a hard time getting mine down to 250 words.

It is certainly not too late for us to discuss Unit 3.

While the anonymity of the virtual environment appears to be disorienting in the first scenario, in the second, one notices significant personal empowerment and even role enhancement. Student B's response shows that she can also assume the *persona* of teacher. Expressions such as, To answer your question and It is certainly not too late are typically used by the dominant participant in the teaching-learning transaction. The anonymity of the environment is seen as having opposing effects.

### **Link selection and use**

One fundamental requirement of communicating within the learning management system that UWIDEC uses, and in virtually all LMSs, is that, in order to engage in a communicative act, the user must first click on the appropriate link. Users of the virtual space must therefore become familiar with the role and function of the link as an important intermediary tool in online communication.

An important feature of the link is that each has its own identity as defined by its label. Thus only messages that are consistent with that title may be accessed or submitted through that link. Users must therefore be sensitive to this, in order to align their communication usage with that defined for the particular link.

After clicking on the link phrase of the Students' Queries and Concerns forum, the user sees the additional explanation, The forum where students seek answers to all general questions and concerns. The explanation for the Group Meeting Room was This is the forum where the tutor and students of the group get to know one another.

All of the utterances given above came from one or other of these two forums. It is evident therefore that students were using these forums in ways that were not initially intended by the designers of the course websites.

Several factors may account for this mismatch, some of which may not necessarily reside with the students. For example, in the layout of the site, these two forums may have been more prominently positioned than others. In addition, at the start of the semester, a lot of emphasis was placed on getting students to use the group meeting room in an attempt to get them started. In fact, posting an introductory statement in that forum was deemed compulsory, even though it was not graded. While these factors warrant consideration, some attention should also be placed on determining the likely learner factors that may have influenced this behaviour.

## DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Distance education theorists and practitioners have always recognized issues related to communication and interaction as being at the core of teaching and learning at a distance (Keegan, 1996). With the advent of online learning, the focus on this concept has not only been maintained but has been heightened, albeit at times, using a different terminology.

Angeli, Valanides and Bonk (2003) investigate interaction in an online conferencing environment and express concern about low levels of thinking and poor interaction in online environments (p.40). Rovai (2002) emphasizes the need to see the online environment as a learning community. Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam and Dunlap (2004) take Rovai's concept further and introduce the term, bounded communities to describe course-based learning environments. Other writers ground their assessment of online communication in the concept of social presence. For example Tu and Mclsaac (2002) suggest that there are three dimensions to social presence, namely social context, online communication and interactivity. These works served to define the context for interpreting the concept of communication in the online teaching-learning environment in this study.

One of the issues emerging from the analysis, is that in communicating for the purpose of learning learners are at various points on a continuum between the information-transmission mode on one end and a constructivist orientation on the other. In seeking to move students towards the latter end, attention needs to be paid to assisting students in developing strategies for exploring their learning problems and for self-evaluation.

The issue of the anonymity of the virtual learning space is another critical issue to be addressed, in order to assist learners to build confidence for interacting in an environment that offers no physical presence.

Finally, in fleshing out the skills, behaviours and attitudes inherent in the communicative acts of UWIDEC's online learners, it is hoped that this study would have provided a stepping stone for articulating the corresponding tutor skills and strategies required for supporting the online learner.

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