

A critical hermeneutic approach to analysing online discussions

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Abstract

For over three decades, the internet has played host to an increasing number of open public forums, where opinions are formed and action instigated (Graham, 2015; Patberg, 2025; Persily, 2017). My current doctoral work explores how participants engage in one such online space designed for students, with the aim of applying my findings to practice in higher education—both to promote learning and to improve students' capacity to communicate well online. This paper will outline my development of a methodology based on critical theory—in particular Jürgen Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (1984, 1987)—to conduct a form of discourse analysis that treats text-based asynchronous online discussion as both person-to-person interaction and as publication.

Keywords: communication; online discussion; critical theory; Habermas; theory of communicative action; discourse analysis

Introduction

Jürgen Habermas' Theory of Communicative Action (TCA) (1984, 1987) aims to describe how people coordinate their action through language, leading to theoretical conclusions regarding how people in a democracy should communicate to make mutually agreeable decisions. TCA has had widespread influence on theory around deliberative democracy (Benhabib, 1992; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004), and has evolved beyond its original form as it has been challenged (Benhabib, 2018; Bessant, 2016; Fraser, 2014; Mouffe, 1999). Two aspects of the theory are particularly pertinent to higher education (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Englund, 2016; Huttunen, 2008; Murphy & Fleming, 2010; Regmi, 2017). First, Habermas describes communicative action as fundamentally epistemological—a process through which knowledge is co-created and moulded intersubjectively by the communicative interaction of multiple participants. Secondly, Habermas clarifies that this process entails repeated cycles in which one participant offers a 'validity claim' and the other participants respond to that claim with their own further claims. These validity claims are based on three different but equal types of knowledge, put simply: factual, normative and experiential. These two elements of TCA have led some educational theorists to conclude that 'deliberative pedagogy' could both promote the co-construction of knowledge and prepare learners for democratic deliberation beyond the classroom (Shaffer, 2018).

Empirical work in this area, however, is rare (cf. Akar, 2016; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005), and almost non-existent when it comes to online communicative interactions (cf. Schaefer & Dervin, 2009). Outside of educational research, on the other hand, extensive empirical studies have been conducted of both face-to-face and online instances of (what could potentially be called) democratic deliberation. Where knowledge construction is concerned, however, earlier studies have been inconclusive overall (Pincock, 2012), and research in this area (both within and outside educational contexts) is methodologically limited in that it typically relies on participant tests, participant surveys, and/or quantitative analyses of aspects of the discussion (e.g. Filatova et al., 2019; Knobloch & Gastil, 2015; Tejedor Fuentes & Paget, 2016). While justifiable in their own contexts, these methods would be problematic for exploration of co-created knowledge via exchanges of validity claims: participant tests and surveys only indicate the knowledge that individuals have (or say they have) gained, rather than the ongoing process of co-creation, while quantification likewise ignores process in favour of, for instance, counting certain words or types of words, categorising responses thematically, or conducting sentiment analysis.

Methodology

Lack of appropriate methodologies for my specific research goals led me to further explore Jürgen Habermas' work around hermeneutics—the interpretation of texts (1971; 1967/1988). Habermas argues that it is not only texts that are interpreted by the audience, but all communication. That is, participants in all forms of communication are constantly interpreting: we interpret others' words; we then interpret what we want to communicate into words; others in turn interpret our words and convert what they want to communicate into words in response; and the cycle begins again. From this perspective, a discussion is always a series of interpretations (Roberge, 2011).

The online context brings together the classic hermeneutic focus on texts and Habermas' extension of this to all communicative interaction in a unique way. Not only are most open online discussions 'born' as text, but they are potentially published to a global audience. At the same time, they are ongoing, direct interactions among two or more people. Thus, they represent both communicative events among active participants and texts offered to a general audience. This means that the non-participant 'lurker', rather than being an outsider to a communication event, is a legitimate member of the event's audience: an active participant in the interpretive side of the event, in which both participants and non-participating readers engage.

Methodologically, then, Habermas' hermeneutical approach legitimises the researcher's position as audience-interpreter: it is not necessary to—or indeed in keeping with—the context to attempt to glean from the active participants what they believe they individually learned, for example, or what

their intentions were when they posted their text. Rather, the researcher is situated within the (potentially) global readership of the discussion, much like one of many readers of a book who decides to analyse the text academically.

This argument has particular value to my research in that it acknowledges the co-creation of knowledge through active communication and the legitimate interpretation of that knowledge by a wider, non-active audience—including the researcher. As such, it is distinct from some other methodological approaches in that it positions online discussions as cohesive wholes, rather than collections of discrete texts that can be analysed independent of each other. This approach also relieves the researcher of a number of ethical dilemmas, such as whether to compromise anonymity in open forums by attempting to identify and contact participants (franzke et al., 2020).

Methods

The actual methods of analysis can therefore be informed by those that have drawn on Habermasian theory in the past. Some such schools of critical discourse analysis (e.g. the discourse-historical approach (Wodak, 2015)), while traditionally focussed on revealing power within discourses, have operationalised TCA to develop hermeneutical methods to conduct close readings of pertinent texts (Cukier et al., 2004; Fairclough & Fairclough, 2012; Forchtner & Schneickert, 2016). Drawing on this work, I have developed a system of analysis that aims to identify different forms of validity claim, how they are accepted or rejected, how they build reciprocal and/or topical strands throughout a discussion thread, and how this process contributes to knowledge construction—or not. These insights are then used to suggest fragments of discussion threads that may benefit from close textual analysis, which is conducted as a full written deep reading.

Conclusion

As this is a work in progress, I will discuss how I have conducted this analysis in the context of discussions on an open online platform for students, and the findings so far. I will conclude by suggesting how these findings may be pertinent to the design of online discussions in higher education, both for the purpose of constructing knowledge and for developing students' skills in productive online interactions.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Durham University School of Education Ethics Committee. A reflexive approach to ethical considerations has been taken throughout.

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