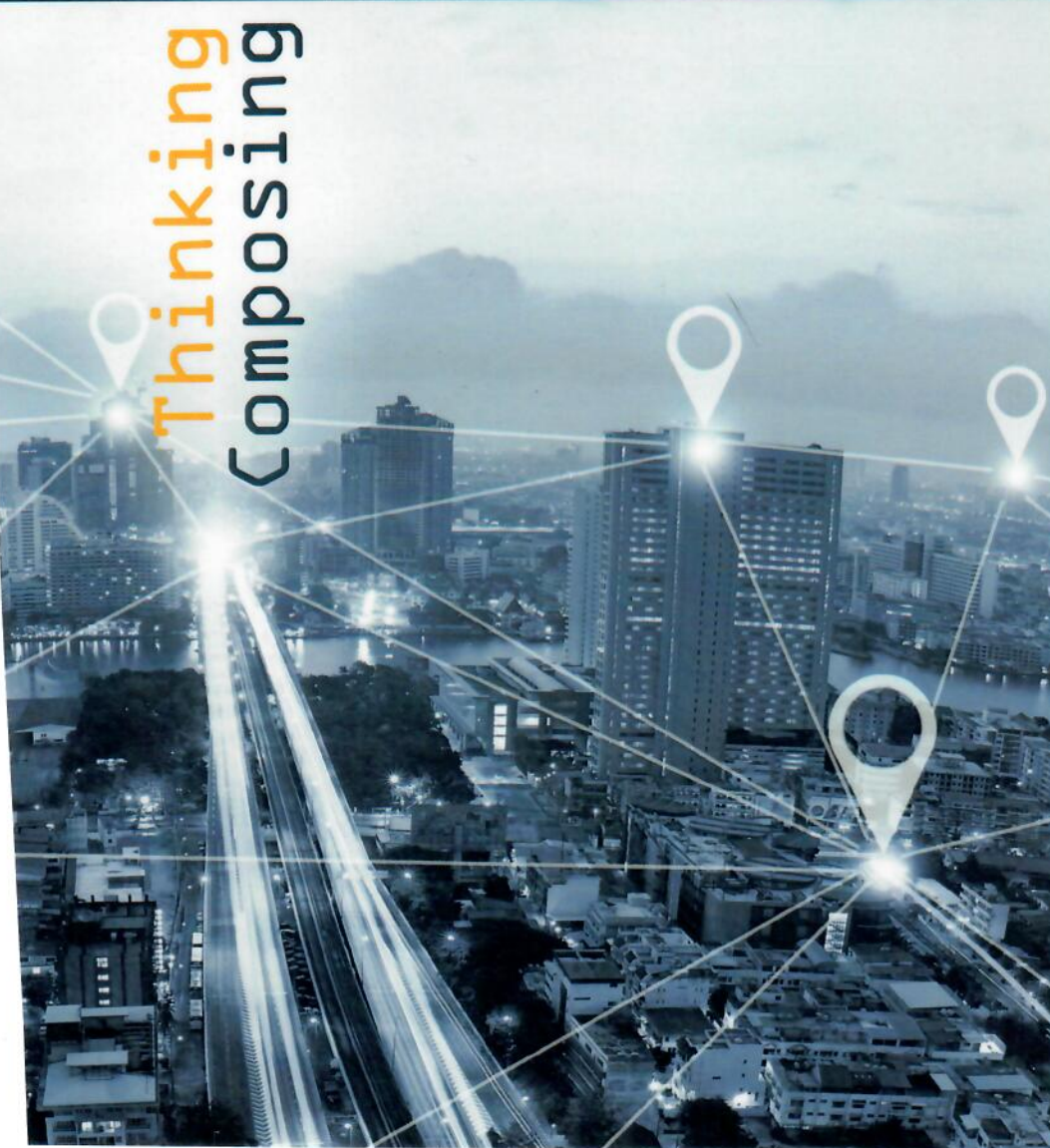


Globally
Locally

Rethinking
Online Writing
in the Age of the
Global Internet

Edited by Rich Rice
and Kirk St-Amant

Thinking
Composing



**THINKING GLOBALLY,
COMPOSING LOCALLY**

*Rethinking Online Writing in the Age
of the Global Internet*

Edited by

**RICH RICE
KIRK STAMANT**

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Logan

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6

LUDIC IS THE NEW PHATIC

Making Connections in Global, Internet-Mediated Learning Environments

Suzanne Blum Malley

ABSTRACT

In the study described here, the author presents an analysis of five years' worth of asynchronous discussion board exchanges from 663 college students at four institutions in three countries (the U.S., South Africa, Russia). In these interactions, playful discourse serves as a rhetorical strategy for initiating and developing social connection through small talk, or "phatic" communication, in a global such international contexts.

Keywords: conveying, discussion boards, global, knowledge-building, Internet-mediated learning environment, ludic, phatic, relational, small talk, transactional, writing classrooms

INTRODUCTION

In Internet-mediated, asynchronous learning environments (IMLEs), teachers and students cannot look for raised hands, cocked eyebrows, nodding heads, or other paralinguistic cues to facilitate communication. The act of conveying ideas can thus be quite complicated because simply presenting oneself as dictated by the practices of embodied greetings or of embodied "small talk" does not work. In such contexts, how does one engage in the interactions essential to fostering meaningful relationships and create effective online communities? Essentially, how does one engage in the "small talk" interactions essential to forging the connections needed to build online communities in international classroom settings?

In this chapter, I share ideas on how student writing in an IMLE offer insights into the peer-to-peer writing teachers typically hope for when designing courses. Further, I argue small talk, or "phatic" (Malinowski, 1989) introductory functions are foundational to social connections and

that those functions often require playful, funny, wry, non-serious, non-earnest, or ludic-as-phatic discursive strategies to successfully negotiate interpersonal connections. I believe to be interculturally competent, we must develop specific ludic-as-phatic negotiations in online spaces to understand our audiences and to move into deeper, more substantive learning and knowledge building.

VALUING THE PHATIC

Anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski coined the term “phatic communion,” defining it as “a type of speech in which ties of union are created in a mere exchange of words” (Malinowski, 1989, p. 315). One of Malinowski’s goals was to support the assertion by Ogden and Richards that all language and linguistic processes derive power from context (p. ix). In doing so, Malinowski sparked debate about and research into just what “phatic” utterances do and mean. As Malinowski explained, “‘phatic communion’ serves to establish bonds of personal union between people brought together by the mere need of companionship and does not serve any purpose of communicating ideas” (Malinowski, 1989, p. 316).

Despite a persistent perception as unimportant, linguists have now widely acknowledged that phatic communion, often referred to as “small talk,” is anything but superfluous, frivolous, secondary, or irrelevant (Laver, 1975; Senft, 1995; Coupland & Coupland, 1992; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Jaworski, 2000; McCarthy, 2003; Holmes, 2006; Holmes & Schnurr, 2006; Holmes & Marra, 2004). Instead, small talk has been identified as a primary rhetorical/discursive strategy for creating “the bonding and respecting behaviors, in local conversational routines, that are the social fabric of communities” (Coupland, 2003, p. 5).

In truth, small talk is just as important when it is not “talk” at all. In face-to-face studies of conversation and small talk, interlocutors have a tremendous amount of paralinguistic, nonlexical components of speech and material information to draw on to “read” each other and to “guide conversational management” (Gumperz & Berenz, 1993, pp. 91–92) as they check on their lines of communication. In a digital, networked, text-only scenario, however, gesture, tone of voice, facial expressions, shared physical space, etc. are absent from the conversation or are added in elaborate Unicode emoticons. In other words, the mechanism for writers to create “small talk” and to establish and maintain lines of communication requires a distinct way of writing in order to create Umberto Eco’s moment of “primary indexicality,” (Eco, 2000, p. 14), the tug-of-the-jacket or tap on the shoulder for attention.

Small talk in digital, networked spaces has also been characterized negatively in many of the same ways that phatic utterances have historically been judged: as meaningless, as inconsequential, and as a waste of time. In educational contexts, the informality of language and the tendency for participants in digital, networked communicative environments (MOOs, discussion boards, LISTSERVs, etc.) to playfully get “off-task” and “waste time” has been noted in a variety of contexts (Cogdill, 1996; Basharina, 2007; Belz, 2002; Rouzie, 2001; Rouzie, 2005). Negative perception is reflected in popular media reports on how digital communication is causing the demise of the English language and the demise of “real” social skills. Yet research on social media and digital communication does not support either supposition (see Androutsopoulos, 2010; Crystal, 2009; Haas et al., 2011; Thurlow, 2003).

Despite the public condemnation, communication in digital networked spaces is “real” communication after all. In fact, researchers repeatedly find in “non-talk” digital, text-based contexts, small talk is more prevalent and perhaps more important (Thurlow, 2003; Thurlow & Poff, 2012; Thurlow & Bell, 2009; Naaman, Boase, & Lai, 2010; Androutsopoulos, 2010; Crystal, 2009; Schandorf, 2012). In their examination of instant messages of college students, for example, Haas et al. (2011) found students “creatively inscribe into their written conversations important paralinguistic information” (p. 380). In other words, the relational cues and signals, or the phatic messages, conveyed by paralinguistic information in face-to-face communication must be *written* in some form or another, making discursive small talk and relational text important areas of inquiry in digital and global writing studies.

Across the research in this area is a consistent pattern of recognition that fun, funny, playful, quirky, or ludic aspects of the discourse of digital writing play a central role in establishing and maintaining open lines of communication. As critics suggest, there is quite a bit of nonsense and goofing off that goes on in online exchanges. Yet what the critics miss is there is something rhetorically purposeful and intentional about how writers, texters, and instant messagers in digital, networked spaces use the playful, funny, and joking paralinguistic cues to establish and maintain social connections. In short, if this type of phatic conversation does not happen, then other, more substantive conversations do not happen either.

PLAYFULNESS AND PHATIC COMMUNION

The playfulness of the “nonsense” in texts in online exchanges has been recognized as a means of performing identity and of creating

and maintaining social relationships online. Baym (1993), for example, acknowledged the important role of wit and humor in the creation of *ethos*. Later, Fernback (2003) observed how wit and humor attract and sustained attention in online communities, particularly in the absence of identifiable, typically embodied characteristics of "brawn, money, or political clout" (Fernback, 2003, p. 213). Much of this early discussion expressed an underlying concern about real work not getting done or "real" meaning not being conveyed. Despite these concerns, online researchers recognized the ludic discourse does *something*. As our networked technologies evolved, so too has recognition playfulness as a form of "doing sociability" without which other aspects of online discourse would fall flat.

Researchers have linked the exploration of conflict in Internet-mediated, asynchronous learning environments (IMLEs) specifically to playful and ludic discourse. Holcomb (1997), for example, noted the joking around was a powerful means to create an online sense of community and facilitate the organization of new and distinct social hierarchies (p. 16). Rouzie (2001), in turn, maintained IMLE discourse often combined serious and playful purposes to provoke and mediate conflict and to negotiate power relationships. Early research highlights how scholars have approached the social and relational work of writing in online classroom spaces and notes it does not always work as instructors intend.

THE RESEARCH CONTEXT

My interest in this area was piqued by my work in a pre-MOOC, global, Internet-mediated online project called Sharing Cultures. The project connected students at my university in Chicago, Illinois, with students in Port Elizabeth and Stellenbosch, South Africa, and in Volgograd, Russia. Every northern hemisphere Spring Semester from 2003 to 2011, the project engaged students and instructors in participating courses in networked, asynchronous, written discussions about issues such as culture/community/identity, HIV/AIDS, global politics, and human and constitutional rights. The participants and structure of the project continued to evolve, but the goals remained constant: to use digital technologies to provide international learning experiences for students who did not have the means to participate in traditional exchange programs, and to create an online space where students and teachers from different backgrounds could share perspectives, experiences, and beliefs.

All of the student participants were first-year university students identified as "at-risk" in terms of preparedness for university-level work

by their home institutions and enrolled in gateway courses required for their continuation at university. In the online, global classroom, students were asked to do four things with the discussion-focused portions of the global exchange: introduce themselves, respond to other students, continue discussions with their peers over the course of the semester on issues of local and global concern related to the course theme, and, in a nutshell, "share cultures." Students also posted graded, classroom-based writing reading and writing assignments in response to teacher prompts that varied by home-institution course, but were visible to all participants.

To address problems of student access to computers and networks, the project was embedded in courses at each institution. Class time across time zones was used to access the international discussion board, both as a means of keeping it a central component of the course and to ensure access to the technological tools needed for the exchanges. Because the participating institutions had different levels of access to high-speed Internet service (from good, to spotty, to none), the Sharing Cultures discussions were alphabetic text-based, without the addition of images, sound, and video available in many other digital platforms.

THE RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This study draws from five years of the Sharing Cultures project discussion board interactions, involving four institutions, 663 students, and 14 different instructors over the five-year period (see Table 6.1).

DATA COLLECTION AND SAMPLING

For data collection and sampling, both data availability and my research questions served as a guide. For data collection, I had access to discussion boards from project years 2006, 2007, 2008, 2010, and 2011. In the five project years of data available for this study, the numbers of students participating fluctuated considerably, and numbers of posts and discussion threads available for analysis also varied.

My research goals included an examination of how students successfully generated response in their introductory posts and an analysis of what happened in student writing in the extended discussions that followed the introductions. I therefore pulled a representative sample of introductory and extended discussion threads from across the five project years. My sample included 300 total discussion threads, with 174 "successful" introductory threads (defined as introductory posts that

Table 6.1. Participating Institutions, Instructors, and Students.

Year	2006	2007	2008	2010	2011	Total
Participating Institutions	1 South Africa 1 U.S.	1 South Africa 1 U.S.	1 South Africa 1 U.S.	1 South Africa 1 U.S. 1 Russia	1 South Africa 1 U.S. 1 Russia	
# Instructors	10	10	7	3	3	14*
# Students	213	191	184	45	30	663

* Some of the same instructors participated in multiple years.

generated the most responses overall), 72 “unsuccessful” introductory posts (defined as introductory posts that did not generate any response at all), and 54 “extended” discussion threads (defined as threads that took place after the introductions and that engaged the most students over the longest periods of time during the semester).

My selection criteria for “successful” and “unsuccessful” introductions was based on an initial review of which introductory posts generated the most responses and which generated no responses. To rule out the possibility top response-generating posts were simply the first posts on a busy discussion board, I resorted the introductory posts by date and time posted. No pattern of clustered responses by date emerged. Initial sorting framed my inquiry into the role of *ludic-as-phatic* discourse in establishing social connections and guided the development of my coding system for the rhetorical activity that creates social groupings in an IMLE.

DATA CODING AND ANALYSIS

Once I had selected the three hundred sample discussion threads, I developed my analytic coding schemes for the introductions and the extended discussions. My goal was to develop schemes that were “conceptually meaningful but also sensitive to the data” (Bazerman, 2008, p. 312) and that made my theoretical perspective and interpretive stance on the corpus explicit (Smagorinsky, 2008, p. 399). To explore how the student writing functioned as relational (phatic/ social) and transactional (information sharing), I developed a system to overlap coded dimensions in the same segment (see Table 6.2). The overlap allowed for a more nuanced analysis of the posts (e.g., making it possible to analyze a statement that included factual personal information, but also written in a humorous way).

Table 6.2. Analytic Coding Scheme for Introductions.

<i>First Pass—INTRODUCTIONS</i>			
Unsuccessful or Successful			
me-focused or other-focused			
me-focused and other focused			
<i>Second Pass—INTRODUCTIONS (4 Dimensions)</i>			
<i>Playful/Humorous</i>	<i>Earnest</i>	<i>Paralinguistic cues</i>	<i>Meta-awareness</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> joking, word play, jesting directed at GNLE context / "play with frame" joking, wordplay, jesting directed at self joking, word play, jesting, "messing with stereotypes" directed at other joking, word play, jesting general invocation of pop culture or celebrity affinities playful response/ play back to someone (getting the joke/playing back) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> description of linguistic/cultural heritage standard greeting/goodbye description of hobbies, likes, activities description of self/status 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> emoticons excessive punctuation all caps lol, jk, just kidding, *off set text*, ha, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> acknowledges what captures attention expresses understanding of how discussion board works

In a first pass through the total 246 introductory posts in the corpus, I designated 174 introductions as "successful" and 72 as "unsuccessful" based on if they generated significant and sustained response threads, with significant response defined as five or more responses including discussions that extended over eight to twelve weeks of the project. I also coded all of the introductory posts as "me-focused," "other-focused," or both, noting segments where the student poster directed questions to a real or imagined audience or acknowledged a potential respondent or any "other" out there.

In a second pass, I coded the introductions themselves and the sequence of responses for the expressive tone of the writing (playful/ludic or earnest) and how each segment was written, specifically looking for how paralinguistic emotional cues and "phatic" moves were encoded in each segment. I developed the subcodes for the playful/humorous and earnest codes out of significant patterns that came out of my initial reviews of the corpus.

“HA-HA- HA-HA- HA-HA- HA-HA!!!!!!!”

My cataloging of the top-all-time-response-generating introduction titles compared to the numerous “no reply at all” introduction titles suggested a connection between playful writing and success and earnest writing and failure in the IMLE context. Indeed, of the 174 top response-generating introductory posts analyzed for this study, 153 (88%) titles are coded as funny/playful in some way. Of the 72 posts that received no responses whatsoever, 70 (97%) of the titles are coded as entirely earnest, while only 2 (3%) unsuccessful introduction titles are coded playful/humorous in some way. The best way, however, to understand the effect of the titles as ludic-as-phatic action is to see actual samples of successful and unsuccessful titles side by side (see Table 6.3).

Titles alone reveal something about how attention is created in online classroom discussions; it is not a typical face-to-face “Hello. How are you?” Instead, it is funny, or quirky, or silly, or exaggerated, or non-sensical, pop-culture related, or provocative. Successful posters use ludic discourse in provocative ways to reach out to readers/responders and invite them in, to make them feel like they have a reason for reading a particular post. In fact, writing with this *ludic-as-phatic* rhetorical strategy is a dominant feature of the successful introductions overall, and it is accomplished in a variety of ways in the introductions.

On the whole, the successful introductions were dominated by writing that included more playful/humorous segments (25%) than earnest (11%), were both me-focused (20%) and other-focused (5%), were heavily infused with written paralinguistic cues (30%), and had some evidence of meta-awareness of the discussion board context (8%). Unsuccessful introductions were overwhelmingly earnest (49%), were more me-focused (38%), and contained far fewer playful segments (1%), inscribed paralinguistic cues (5%) or meta-awareness of the context (3%). Students wrote their playful/humorous moves in several ways throughout the introductions, including: joking/“messing with” stereotypes/assumptions of others (12%), joking/poking fun at self (20%), joking/poking fun at the IMLE/Sharing Cultures context itself (11%), joking and word play in general (16%), playing back to someone else’s post (17%), and enthusiastic invocation of pop culture or celebrity affinities (24%).

The playful small talk (*ludic-as-phatic*) served to invite response and convey to readers the emotional/affective tenor with which readers should interpret the posts. The playfulness of the relational information was interspersed with actual transactional personal information and thoughts. The impact of *ludic-as-phatic* rhetorical strategies was evident in 153 (88%) of the 172 successful introductions, which all had segments

Table 6.3. Example Successful and Unsuccessful Introduction Post Titles.

<i>Examples of Titles Generating Most Response 2006–2011</i>	<i>Examples of Titles Generating No Response 2006–2011</i>
hello there you bunch of U.S. pupetts	me
Huge 50cent fan!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!	The me nobody knows
Smokey McPot	Let us begin.
Young Nubian Queen	"name's" Introduction
ROCK STAR	My other side . . .
Ahoy to da yanks from mother africa	Introduction to me, "name"
Death metal mixed with dance	A quick glance at "name"
HOLLYWOOD HERE I COME!	who is "name"
MELLYMELV IS IN THE BUILDING!!!	Who?
Fascinating isn't it?	All about name . . .
LUCKY LADY FROM THE LAKESIDE	Molweni Nonke (hello everybody)
"IT'S CHATTING TIME SO—O..."	Introducing "name"
straight outta schaumpton	Welcome to the world of me
Even Better Than The Real Thing	It's me . . . "name"
Hey hey hey!!!!	All about "name"
Don't tell me pudding is Pie!	Welcome 2me
I'm not wearing any pants	me myself and I
midterms are so FUN	An introduction about me
They call me Scary Kerry	Me!
Shit is Going to Hit the Fan!!	A very interesting student profile
heyta yall !!!!!:-)	"name"
shutter CLICK	hi!
xaxa:-D	Hello, It's Me.
HiP HoP is dead!!!	I'm a lovely person.
A Fun Floridian YO!	Goeiemore almal (Good morning all)
I CUDDLE WITH WILLIAM SHATNER EVERY NIGHT! SHAKE AND BAKE!	Goeie dag (Good day)
I love Big Macs	Hello.
Country Gal YEE HAW	another one from NMMU
Hot Momma	sharing cultures
Peter Pan: To Live would be an awfully big adventure!!!!	Hello, my classmates!

continued on next page

Table 6.3—continued

<i>Examples of Titles Generating Most Response 2006–2011</i>	<i>Examples of Titles Generating No Response 2006–2011</i>
Texas Girl	"name" from Minnesota
Appel ... like Apple!	its a gud day
BoooooTyLicious	Just me
UNAPPRECIATED DREAM	All about me
HEY P.I.M.P.S	Mr "name"
2 Dollars Short	another one from NMMU

coded as playful/humorous in some way. Those same 153 introductions also had some segments coded as earnest, with about one third of each post segments on average coded as playful and two thirds coded as some form of earnest self-description. Notably, it was a combination of playful and earnest, usually with some written paralinguistic information that consistently created the social connections necessary for continued conversation and continued learning. The ludic discourse, playful in a variety of ways, served as an important social lubricant, "provoking and mediating" interest and sometimes conflict (Rouzie, 2005, p. 284), allowing for the other, important transactional information to be read in both earnest and playful form.

*Ha-ha" "LOL" "Just kidding! Buwhahah:-) ;-) *This is Paralinguistic**

For a segment of an introductory post to be read as playful, fun, joking, poking fun, enthusiastic, or funny by a wide audience, it must be *written* that way. Researchers have found the paralinguistic cues associated with face-to-face communication are represented textually and graphically in online conversations (Haas et al., 2011; Thurlow, 2003; Thurlow & Bell, 2009; Thurlow & Poff, 2012; Androutsopoulos, 2000). In an examination of the frequency of use of the "IM" features, Haas et al. (2011) found that majority of these posts are "*additive* and . . . are related to *paralinguistic inscription* [emphasis original]" (390), rather than simply shortcuts to abbreviate the message, which is a common assumption about writing practices in text messaging and instant messaging (Crystal, 2009; Thurlow, 2003).

I found similar patterns of paralinguistic inscription using IM features in the successful introductions on the Sharing Cultures discussion boards, with all 153 of the 153 (100%) successful introductory posts coded as

playful/humorous and earnest. In the IMLE discussion board environment, students were not required to “shorten” posts due to word limits. Instead, the choice to combine these elements was a rhetorical one given the constraints of the crowded text-only digital space of the IMLE.

The following entries representative “successful” introductory posts that highlight the role the written paralinguistic cues played in allowing students to “read” one another, to establish a tone overall, to smooth communication, and to contribute to the phatic creation of a “social fabric” (Coupland, 2003, 5). In these examples, segments coded as playful (including pop culture references and other subcodes) are in bold text, paralinguistic cues are italicized, earnest (including subcodes) are underlined, and meta-awareness (expressing an understanding of the Sharing Cultures and/or how the discussion board works, negative or positive) are strikethrough.

I Like 2 Pet Puppies . . . and spanking Monkies should be an Olympic sport

So I guess NOW would be a good time for me to do the whole “Hi my name is” . . . (*buwhahah this makes me think of m&m) anyhowooo.*

Hi my name is M_____ignon Stokes **and yes I will admit I like to pet Puppies I have been petting puppies since the tender age of 17.**

Ok basic background Info:

I’m almost 20 (**Gives a High 5 to my “Real” imaginary friend**)

I study at NMMU (**No More Money University**)

I’m Currently doing a BA Genral *EXTENDED*...

I Dislike eating dead Cow...aka I’m pasciterean

I’m quite fond of Reading, writing, photography, art etc. etc.

And I am so over this Blog...

SOoooo Drop me a Line or 99!!

Peace Be da Journey

M_____ NMMU at 2008-02-18 06:27

If each segment was read alone and out of context from the others, a reader might miss the playfulness of “My name is M___ and yes I will admit I like to pet puppies . . .” M___’s reference to “spanking Monkies” is also clearly a form of transgressive, sexual humor that m_____ extends throughout the post, establishing himself, posturing really, and inviting like-minded folks to reply. In fact, humor related to sex and drugs was a frequent component of the playful/humorous writing on the discussion boards, often serving as a filter for response; those who were offended did not reply, while those who were willing to play picked up the thread and responded along those lines.

In the next posts, the playful, earnest, and paralinguistic elements are combined in similar ways:

I CUDDLE WITH WILLIAM SHATNER EVERY NIGHT! SHAKE AND BAKE!

ALLO ALLO WORLD!

how are you today you beautiful amazing people?!

weeeelllll if you wanna know i am fabulous!

I currently attend columbia college in chicago studying marketing.

Uhmhhh i'm in a band and we rock socks, I also play golf, and have been for 11 years. *weird?* I love to just hangout and talk, and just have an all around super time! **SHAKE AND BAKE!**

i love puppies, and kittens, and everything soft. i also love to cuddle. i hate lance too.

no seriously though, i'm a good guy and i always look forward to meeting and talking to new people about anything.

so talk to me = *D*

By d_____ CCC at 2008-03-06 17:21

HiP HoP is dead!!!,

'Hey *wassup* everybody!

My name is lb_____ from East London in South Africa.

I'm currently a student at NMMU doing the BA Ext course, its a foundation course and im hoping to change to LLB next year.

I am a very handsome guy the current Mr NMMU, (JOKES)!! Lets just say Im cute.

I am a "*hip hop head*" and **loving the new Papoos, Game, Jigga and Nasir Jones's albums.**

Hip Hop is dead and 50 helped kill it, but I think he is going to try bring it back to life when he drops his new album.

My lecturer will kill me if she sees the slang I've used to write this introduction so, allow me to get serious now.

I am 21 years of age, I am Xhosa

and I enjoy watching Rugby and Top Gear its a motor car show.

When i graduate **I intend to become the Dr's Advocate.**

Jokes aside I will become an Advocate.

Ohh and holla back if you are a "Hip Hop Head" (ladies in particular please!)

lb_____ NMMU at 2008-02-18 06:27

The combination of elements (i.e., playful/humorous, earnest, and written paralinguistic cues) was found across all of the 153 successful introductory posts with playful elements. While the numbers of segments coded in each category varied, the intertwined, entangled nature

of the combinations did not change. The pattern that emerged was thus one where all three elements could be present in one sentence or one string of sentences. As such, these posts accomplished the relational and phatic work of the writing while also accomplishing the transactional or informational work of the writing.

Combining ludic and paralinguistic writing to create the relational underpinnings for successful introductions demonstrates a rhetorical savvy showcasing solid understandings of tenets of audience, purpose, available means of communication, *ethos*, *logos*, and *pathos* in this particular environment. Allowing and even encouraging students to write in this way might be a hard sell in the classroom given the negative reception such writing has received in the popular press and in educational environments. Nevertheless, this type of conversation can create an important social selection mechanism for the participants on the discussion board. Here the small talk invites conversation, but only with a specific group of self-selecting people who were able to find some kind of affinity with one another and those affinities regularly crossed nationalities and ethnicities in the global, intercultural setting. Posting in this way demonstrates participants understood discourse practices in this medium and their own socio-semiotic positions within it. That awareness allowed students to use the tools available to assist in the overall socialization of the group, creating a sense of social connection.

I like to think i'm a funny person . . . (funny looking) haha just kidding

The *ludic-as-phatic* written discourse in the posts was quite often self-referential. Students rarely poked fun at others (and when they did, it was directed at assumptions/stereotypes, not individuals); instead, they poked fun at themselves, exaggerating aspects of their life stories, often noted with a paralinguistic “ha-ha” cue in the text itself, or including fun or quirky tidbits of information about themselves.

The 153 “successful” introductions contained 274 segments coded as playful, with 54 instances (20%) of self-referential/self-deprecating humor conveyed through words and paralinguistic written cues. These self-referential playful segments were not consolidated in just a few of the introductions; rather, they appeared across almost all of the posts with playful/humorous segments. Two examples here demonstrate how students use the self-referential joking coupled with written paralinguistic cues to help their peers “read” them and *want* to read them. The bold text indicates segments that include some kind of self-referential or self-deprecating playful move. The italicized written paralinguistic cues:

Im bringing sexy back . . . heres how

Hello everyone! My name is _____. i am a junior at Columbia college double majoring in broadcast journalism and marketing communication. I am a fun girl who can turn any frown up side down. **I have some pretty funny nicknames including porkchop (apparently when i was a baby i was a little pudgy) haha. Froglegs is another . . . I got this one basically because my friends think i have noo coordination when it comes to dancing.** I have some normal nicknames too . . . like Barbie and ladybug.

I like to think im a funny person . . . (funny looking) haha just kidding. Here is a joke that describes my life . . . its called blonde driving:

A blonde was swerving all over the road and driving very badly, so she got pulled over by a cop. The cop walked up to her window and asked, "Miss, why are you driving so recklessly?" The blonde said, "I'm sorry sir, but wherever I go, there's always a tree in front of me and I can't seem to get away from it!" The cop looked at her and said, "Lady, that's your air freshener!"

I love the color pink, in fact my (new apartment) is all pink, from the walls to the furniture. (*think Audry Hepburn in Breakfast at Tiffany's*) I live alone in the city (which sucks...the alone part). One very important thing i should mention is that I'm turning 21 *IN A WEEK* and a half!!!! I'm absolutely positively *sooo* excited about that! I hope you had a fun time reading my little rant/introduction!

By ccc at 2007-03-13 18:06 | Introductions |

The Freaky-Guy

My name is mm_____, **my friends call me Chris Brown** (*ha ha!*). I come from Kimberley(South Africa). I'm old enough to go clubbing. I'm a Law Student at the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University and I'm enjoying it thus far. I intend on completing the course as soon as possible and then in turn specialise in Commercial Law.

I enjoy watching television and driving on the free-way at night, because that is when all the "*SPEED-FREAKS*" come out to play! I'm crazy about freaky-girls, **mainly because they claim that I'm a freaky-guy :-).** And, i love guitar. It is an awesoem instrument to play (**I tried and I don't expect to exceed very far—my pinkie is too little**) :(

By mm_____ NMMU at 2007-03-02 08:24

As evidenced by the frequent paralinguistic "ha-ha"s or "just joking"s or "lol"s after an exaggeration or personal tidbit, and the instructions for readers to think of a particular movie star or pop culture icon, the students appear to be aware of the emotional tone of the messages they are sending and seem to use on-screen cues to convey that tone. Students combine the self-referential, self-deprecating humor with the paralinguistic written cues as a means of conveying personal information to strangers in a socially acceptable way, of engaging interest, and, ultimately, of provoking some kind of reply.

Lions and Tigers and Bears, Oh My!

The playful written small talk on the discussion boards occasionally played with or made fun of the “other,” but not usually directly. This type of “messing with” each other appeared when students were playing with the assumptions and stereotypes they believed the others to have about them and is of particular interest in a globally networked classroom. This type of interaction was *ludic-as-phatic* with a bit of an edge, serving even more as a test or filter than the merely playful, quirky, or transgressive. There were 33 segments of 274 total from the 153 successful “playful/humorous” introductions coded as “joking, word play, jesting, messing with stereotypes directed at other.” This form of play with assumptions highlights a whole host of student understandings of the social activity and the layers of the project—the discussion boards and the goals of cultural sharing, the varying cultures and subject positions of the participants, and the existing stereotypes about each other.

The most identifiable examples of this type of *ludic-as-phatic* discourse have always been generated by the South African students and played back by the U.S. students. The South African students often articulated a heightened awareness of the mistaken assumptions that Americans might have had about Africa; they assumed some level of ignorance and played (with an edge) to see whether or not they were right. Those assumptions were also often obvious and primed for the testing (in every year of the project, U.S.-based students in all classes referenced *The Lion King* as a source of information about countries in Africa). The U.S. students, on the other hand, seemed not to consider mistaken assumptions that South Africans might have had of them. Those assumptions typically took much longer to work their way to the surface of the discussions. Awareness or lack of awareness of assumptions reveals a sociocultural layer unique to the power positions of the two countries in the world and, sadly, the arrogance with which many Americans perceive the world.

In the introductory post here, student s___ utilizes *ludic-as-phatic* discourse as discussed above, but also moves into an edgier space when he references a pet lion. The post was not the first or only appearance of lions on the Sharing Cultures discussion board, or of tigers, or bears, or elephants, or monkeys. In each instance, posts like this one initiated some of the most fruitful, “sharing” conversations, all the while filtering out the people who just did not get it. In the two examples below, the South African students very purposefully and very explicitly “mess with” the assumptions of the American students who might be out there. Much as with the other paralinguistic, self-referential joking, and pop culture examples of *ludic-as-phatic* writing in the introductions, they are

able to attract attention, generate response, and sustain conversation over the course of the semester.

The GREAT one himself it's FIASCO but not lupe!!

Whats up!!!! My name is S_____ aka fiasco how u guys doing? Im first year student at NMMU im studying Media Studies. Im young Xhosa male just came back frm the UK, I took a two year break, living and working in the UK. It was cool the British are cool people really friendly and quiet open to many cultures. I was born in Cape Town then moved to Bloemfontien at the age of sixteen. after arriving back in SA I was really keen to be back in the country and studying, it's been alright so far I've met lots of cool peeps local and international. I enjoy listen to music, watching movies, chillin with my friends and going out. Im down to earth, ambitious just a normal cool dude. Yo people I got to go can't chat here 4eva hopefully I'll might some of one day and we kick it go out 4 a beer or something, until we chat again **'snap' almost 4got ya i got a pet lion it's called Simba**, anyway tar! tar! asta la vista! peace!! cheers have a good one.

By s_____ NMMU at 2007-03-05 11:17 | Introductions | |

THATS AWSOME

YOUR SO LUCKY TO HAVE A PET LION. I HAVE ALWAYS WANTED AN EXOTIC PET LIKE THAT. EITHER A LION OR A CAPOOCHEN MONKEY OR SOMETHING LIKE THAT. HOW OLD IS YOUR LION? IS IT A MALE OR FEMALE? IS IT NICE, AND IS IT TRAINED? LIKE, CAN YOU GO AND JUST PLAY AROUND WITH IT? I ONLY HAVE DOGS, THREE OF THEM. HOPE TO TALK TO YOU SOON.

By t_____ CCC at Mon, 2007-03-05 16:23 | reply

Hey whats up!!!!

Hi how are you? im "chillin" , **yo about the lion i was just kiddin I don't really have a lion just wanted to see if anybody fell for it sorry about that I didnt think that anyone was that gullable sorry Im not trying to be rude we (South Africans) are not allowed to tame wild animals unless you have a resort or reserve, but its cool that you want one I think its allowed in the States.** Thanks for the message and I hope it goes well with the pet thing. What are you studing and what do hope to achieve with degree?

By s_____ NMMU at Mon, 2007-03-12 10:55 | reply

yeah!

When I looked at your title I saw Fiasco and I Was like YEAH! I neer really liked any sort of hip hop till I heard Lupe. I read somewhere that he is not considered one of the new pioneers of hip hop, and is one of the only artists that is keeping what he does real. Unlike a lot of the crap that is

played on the radio here. Plus he's from Chicago so its even sweeter. You into Common or Kanye?

The name is N_____ by th way.

By n_____ccc at Tue, 2007-03-13 01:01 | reply

In the first example, s___ uses all forms of *ludic-as-phatic* discourse found in this study, which very successfully generates responses and in different ways. One student respondent, t___, is so excited by the lion that s/he responds in all upper case, missing the playing altogether. Another respondent, n___, skips the lion completely, responding to the Hip Hop reference instead. S___ then clearly articulates his overall approach to using the *ludic-as-phatic*, saying "yo about the lion i was just kiddin I don't really have a lion just wanted to see if anybody fell for it sorry about that I didnt think that anyone was that gullable sorry Im not trying to be rude . . ." He makes sure that the misinformed reader understands that he meant to have fun, not to harm. This demonstrates an awareness of the overall social goals of the project and the potential hurt caused by playing with assumptions in this way.

In another example, sv___ warns s/he is playing with assumptions by titling her/his introduction "stereotype type." Here the students respond primarily to the music references in his post, but they also congratulate sv___ on her/his effective play for attention in the introduction, with one exception. sv___ does not gently rebuke the student who asks if riding bears is safe. It is possible that because in that particular response post, there are no paralinguistic cues from bf___ about whether or not he or she is joking back. The student does not convey what he or she hopes the response will be. Whatever the case, sv___ simply ignores the post; the student didn't "get it," so sv___ does not interact. Instead s/he mentions how much s/he appreciates the fact that the other students are aware of her/his play. The *ludic-as-phatic* filter, then, has worked, connecting her/him to people s/he now considers, and thanks for, being "open minded."

stereotype type

Hey there, my name is _____, from Mthatha. If you have no idea where that is, go to google and look up 'crime capital of the world' and if that doesn't work try "universe." I am a first year Law student at NMMU. **Studying here has made me more tolerant toward animals as we have a very intelligent elephant in our class. The monkeys are good in practical exercises but they lack in theory. In between lectures we hangout at the dining hall, where we share the spoils of the previous days hunt. Coming to school is a hustle because bears (our official mode of transport) are in hibernation.** I enjoy listening to hip-hop and neo soul. My favorite

artists are Common, Aesope Rock, Jill Scott, Gaopele and Mos Def. I have to go now

By sv_____ NMMU at 2007-03-09 08:13 | Introductions | blog |

BEARS?

Is riding bears safe? if it is, thats cool, i would like to ride a bear some day then. thats kind of funny, because here in chicago out profesional football team is called the chicago bears, although i have never seen one here. whatever, i find it intresting that you consider Mthatha the murder capital of the world, and i have never herd of it. I know that a lot of people who come to America are afraid because so many peopel think that we have an outrageous amount of crime, and we might, but i never feel like my life is in danger. Do you feel like your life is in danger when you walk arond in your home town?

By bf_____ CCC at Wed, 2007-03-10 01:41 | reply

FOR THE LOVE OF MUSIC

Wud up Sv_____! Your INTRODUCTION caught my attention so i thought i would drop you a comment. ITs was interesting how you used stereotypes to introduce your self. I noticed that we have something in common HIP-HOP! I LOVE HIP-HOP! And i also like common, mizz Scott and MOS DEF! I acually saw Mos Def last year in New York at the Apollo. Well write me back if you want to chit chat!! BYE

By I_____ccc at Tue, 2007-03-13 16:34 | reply

Hello

Haha! That was funny. I do realize that you're joking. But ya made me laugh. I wish we COULD ride bears around, that would be awesome. Imagine a world without cars, but bears! I love Aesope Rock too, have you ever listened to Jurassic 5 or Atmosphere or Michael Franti? You'd like them if you like Aesope. Haha, I'm still laughing. Dude, thanks for making my day. Check out the music.

Peace,

By sb_____ccc at Tue, 2007-03-13 16:31 | reply

The new danger

Ha ha I love this. We should all have intros like this.

I LOVE MOS DEF!

By sa_____ccc at Wed, 2007-03-14 00:33 | reply

What happened to Talib

I'm glad that I'm not the only Mos fan on this site because I'm the only one in my class. Most people, that I know, are into that whole "bling

bling" type of hip hop. Anyway, what ever happene to Talib Kweli? The last time I saw him he was performing a jiggy song with the Black Eyed Peas. Please dont tell me Talib has sold out. If you know what happened keep me posted

peace

By sv_____ NMMU at Fri, 2007-03-16 08:29 | reply

Thanks for realising that I

Thanks for realising that I was joking, its not often that foreigners discard that garbage that CNN shoves down your throats. For example, Ludacris came to South Africa last year and asked that we make him chief for a day. I personally thought that was the most ignorant thing I've ever heard. Anyway,thanks for being open-minded and I've Atomsphere but not the other two,I'll check them out. By the way, you should try finding albums by two of the dopest South African cats, Tumi and the Volume, and Hymphatic Thabs.Iam sure you'll love them.

peace

By sv_____ NMMU at Fri, 2007-03-16 07:35 | reply

Aesope Rock is so awesome!

FROM LUDIC-AS-PHATIC TO LEARNING

Participants who wrote successful introductions overwhelmingly approached the IMLE with a *ludic-as-phatic* lens, with 88 percent of the introductory posts that generated sustained discussion containing some combination of playful elements with written paralinguistic cues to make connections with other students. Only 1 percent of the unsuccessful introductory posts analyzed, those that generated no response, contained some combination of those elements. Instead, the unsuccessful posts were overwhelmingly earnest and self-focused. They were friendly and perfectly nice, but they did not give their readers any reason to give back; they did not contain the phatic discourse that enables open channels of communication.

The introductory phase of the IMLE activity might easily be characterized in a disparaging way, as small talk often is, as focused on the "social nonsense" or even on "transgressive" material. My analysis of the discussion board activity across five years of the Sharing Cultures project, however, suggests this initial social, *ludic-as-phatic* phase is key to an IMLE in which global communicators are expected to learn from one another. In a continuation of this study, it became clear engaged, interactive, extended discussions throughout the semester did **not** take place for the participants who had not made connections with peers through the introductory phase. The 66 percent of total students who

participated in the discussions that followed the introductory posts in the Sharing Cultures IMLE are nearly identical to the 66 percent of total students that successfully forged discussion board relationships with other students in the introductions. The discussion board activity of these participants was characterized by high numbers of posts and comments across many participant-generated discussions. The remaining 29 percent of student participants, after "unsuccessful" introductions and/or no attempts to reply to the introductory posts of their peers, limited their activity on the discussion board overall to direct responses to teacher assignment prompts. The pattern of activity for these students was characterized by relatively few posts, depending upon how many teacher prompts each student encountered, and no comment activity on other student posts.

In the context of global, online learning environments, initial, social/phatic, "small-talk" exchanges between student participants should be included as key elements of curricular design. The *ludic-as-phatic* aspects of introductory conversations can and should be explored as powerful rhetorical tools for navigating social activity in IMLEs. Understanding these strategies appears to be of particular importance for getting relationships off the ground in large-scale teaching and learning spaces. Without the *ludic-as-phatic* writing strategies mediating the multiple layers of social network connections, the discussion, the collaboration, the sharing, and therefore the peer-to-peer learning, simply does not happen.

CONCLUSION

As writing teachers, we share an unspoken assumption participation and response drive learning and are responsible for creating a classroom community. In increasingly global, online classrooms, the writing that is generated on a site is often a direct index of level of participation. Since computer-mediated communication was first introduced in the composition classroom, researchers have explored the need for digital networked participation and how students take that participation in their own directions when given the opportunity to do so (Rouzie, 2005; Fleckenstein, 2005; McKee, 2002). While there is agreement on the value of online written interaction and the recognition of significant social, cultural, and technological barriers to equal participation, there has been limited rhetorical investigation of how student writing structures participation.

In this study, I have questioned *how* students write to successfully generate response and create social connections in an IMLE and have

uncovered one key, comprehensive answer: they include phatic, relational rhetorical moves to initiate and sustain conversation. The conclusion may seem obvious. However, phatic and relational speech and writing are often discounted as extraneous to the real writing tasks at hand or as nonsense and a waste of time when articulated in negative terms. My research demonstrates such writing is necessary for the other forms of writing and learning to happen in an IMLE.

It is a challenge to recognize the value of this type of discussion board writing. In the project years with large numbers of student participants (2006–2008 with roughly two hundred students each year), it was easy to get lost in what looked like silly, crazy, “nonsense” in the introductory posts and never see how students were using *ludic-as-phatic* relational strategies to make connections and decide with whom they wanted to converse.

Understanding *ludic-as-phatic* relational rhetorical strategies appears to be important for getting relationships off the ground in large-scale teaching and learning spaces where students must work to create social connections with relative strangers. As teachers who create Internet-mediated learning spaces, we need to consider how the underpinnings of social conventions shift and change in global digital networked environments. While no easy solution exists, students and teachers can learn to be aware of how relational rhetorical strategies merge with transactional writing in digital networked writing spaces. In fact, if we do not teach students how to make facilitative connections, we are failing to teach effective communication for global online environments.

Based on the research presented here, I suggest shifting our attitude toward phatic and relational writing and helping our students develop a rich understanding of this rhetorical means of creating social fabric in digital, networked, and intercultural spaces. We can make use of this research in two important ways related to working with the *knowledge practices of academic writing* in online classrooms. First, we can help students recognize the writing they do in online discussion spaces as sophisticated ways of making connection, building argument, and creating alignment and identification with an audience. Second, we can do the analytical work to understand global IMLE writing as situated in a unique and evolving rhetorical situation. Writing is increasingly taking place in digital, networked environments. We should therefore work to understand how this writing works as a process and a product worthy of our scholarly and teacherly attentions.

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