

Narrative Analysis of Two On-line Political Simulations

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Abstract: We describe the use of narrative analysis for investigating learning in two on-line political character-playing simulations, and propose a framework for analyzing discourse that occurs both on- and off-line in the projects.

Keywords: computer-mediated communication, discourse, high school, learning communities, mentoring, simulations, social studies education

Project Descriptions

In this research we use narrative analysis to explore the educational significance of two on-line political simulations, The Arab-Israeli Conflict Simulation (AIC) and The Conflux Project. Both AIC and Conflux use character-play, electronic and face-to-face student collaboration, online and offline mentoring, and sophisticated decision-making mechanisms to create rich learning environments for high school and university students. In both simulations, high school students adopt the personas of real-life political leaders. Players use specially designed web-based software to communicate with each other in a series of online policy debates. A brief description of each project follows. More detailed descriptions can be found at <http://ics.soe.umich.edu>.

Arab-Israeli Conflict

In AIC, students take on the roles of world leaders engaged in the ongoing conflict in the Middle East. Starting from an initial description of the current political situation, the characters interact with each other over an 8-week period. Apart from the scenario and background materials we provide, the events of the game are entirely student-driven. There are three groups of participants in AIC: (1) high school students in approximately a dozen schools around the world; (2) "facilitators," most often teachers at the students' schools, who provide guidance and enrichment activities; and (3) the AIC "mentoring staff," University of Michigan undergraduate students receiving course credit for acting as advisors and "gamemasters."

Conflux

In Conflux, students assume the roles of real-life politicians in a series of concurrent web-based policy conferences. In the interest of encouraging appreciation for multiple perspectives, each student assumes three different character roles. Students are asked to wrestle with intensive, and sometimes controversial, topics. Several different communications tools are used in the game, including press-releases, real-time chat, email and threaded discussion forums. Most crucial to the game is the "floating voting" mechanism, a form of probabilistic decision-making designed to encourage deliberation. There are three groups of participants in Conflux. Beside the student cohort participating as politicians, another group of high school students, experienced players themselves, act as mentors to their less experienced peers. They also participate directly in the game as lobbyists, journalists, and "expert witnesses." The third group consists of the Conflux "mentoring staff," University of Michigan undergraduate students receiving course credit for acting as gamemasters and political aides.

Analytical Framework, Data, and Methods

Pilot studies of AIC and Conflux suggest that the nature of learning through these activities is complex and difficult to predict. Unlike most web-based learning programs, the nature of character-playing games requires giving students the ability to choose the direction their activity takes through online and offline discussion and collaboration. Because the events of each game are negotiated among the students, facilitators, mentors and game directors, and because this discourse appears to be the primary way students construct meaning from their experiences in these games, our research focuses on making sense of this discourse in terms of student learning.

Initial studies have identified three main loci of discourse in each game: (1) "game discourse" -- on-line text that makes up (mostly) conversations among students acting as characters and between characters and mentors; (2) "surrounding discourse" -- face-to-face discussion (generally in schools), which may occur in traditional classroom settings, small team groups, or in more subtly constructed social settings; and (3) "meta-discourse" about the activities, including discussions by students, educators, mentors, and game designers about the educational and ideological value of these projects, their relationship to school curricula, instructional design issues, and their value within particular content areas. Each of these discourses is incomplete without the others. The problem remains, however, of how these three loci operate and how they are related.

The types of discourse in question defy easy categorization, and traditional methods of text or conversation analysis do not adequately explain the complex activities that occur in these games. The meaning students construct as a result of participating in these exercises has much to do with how sequences of events and conversations unfold for individual characters over time. Because of this, we have turned to narrative analysis as our primary methodology. Narrative analysis involves linking events temporally into a causal sequence ("plot") in a way that clarifies the relationships between events (Polkinghorne, 1995). By choosing narrative analysis, we endeavor to understand AIC and Conflux in a way that the participants themselves most likely understand it -- i.e., as narrative (Jackson, 1995). In making this choice, we are also adopting Rosaldo's (1986) position that the value of an experience can be found not in what is "typical" about it, but what is unique for an individual.

Data for these studies include logs of students' on-line communication, classroom field notes and audio tapes, and interviews with participants, mentors, and facilitators. Each of the authors is involved with the design of one of the exercises, leading a mentoring group, and facilitating a group of participants. One data source is field notes and recordings of classroom activity taken by the authors, but we have attempted to make our study "polyvocal" (Farrell, Peguero, Lindsey, & White, 1988; Tobin & Davidson, 1990) by asking the participants to document and interpret their experiences in forms including written narrative, speech, and video. Analysis is based on an ethnographic method of holistic organization of data and iterative writing (Bruner, 1986), resulting in a narrative that is both descriptive and reflective (Polkinghorne, 1995). Also critical to our analysis is the "meta-discourse" described above -- including the role our own pedagogical and ideological beliefs play in determining the value of each exercise (Bruner, 1986).

Narrative Themes

Preliminary narratives focus on the ways in which: (a) student learning is often most evident in the "surrounding discourse" and cannot be adequately assessed by looking at the on-line text alone; (b) student participation can lead to profound changes in the ideology of individual students, often contrary to the intent of the project designers; (c) events in the games can require the project designers, mentors, and/or the teacher-facilitators to rethink their basic assumptions about pedagogy within their content areas; (d) a simulation can have an impact on a larger educational community within a given school; and (e) the experience of mentoring can change students' attitudes toward education, as they find themselves in a situation where their own learning is immediately in the service of less experienced peers.

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