

Dialoguing in electronic public spheres:
Reconceptualizing participation as verb-ing micro-practices

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RUNNING HEAD: VERBING ONLINE DIALOGUE

Abstract

In this paper, we argue that the usual approaches to studying communication in Internet-based public spheres are too limited and prevent us from pinpointing how communication behaviors either inhibit or facilitate dialogue. We propose an analytic informed by Sense-Making Methodology’s communication-as-procedure framework in order to explicate dialogic activity as participants discuss potentially contentious issues. In particular, we focus on verbings: dynamic communicative micro-practices through which participants make and unmake actually existing public spheres. To illustrate, we analyze 1,360 postings contributed to three pedagogical online discussion groups devoted to issues of race and popular/elite culture. We demonstrate that a focus on grounded communicative behaviors allows us to zoom in on the active production/reproduction of social structures, enabling a better understanding of dialogic processes that can lead to the creation of more effective public spheres.

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by David J. Schaefer and Brenda Dervin

Introduction: the case for studying micro-practices within online public spheres

In the past few decades, research interest in dialogic process within computer-mediated communication (CMC) environments has exploded. Spurred by the emergence of USENET newsgroups, online chat rooms, and web-based discussion groups, researchers have become particularly interested in the use of CMC to create Habermasian-style (1962/1989; 1996) public spheres—formal/informal spaces for the discussion and debate of potentially contentious social issues that impact all dialoguing parties. Ess (1996; 2000), Schneider (1997), and others have noted that communicative action—rational-critical dialogue geared toward mutual understanding—is the engine by which both formal and informal public spheres are created and maintained.

Given increased international access to the Internet, the potential for dialoguing with others who do not share one's perspective continues to grow at an unprecedented pace (Dervin and Schaefer, 1999; Giddens, 1999), highlighting the need for better understanding of dialogic processes that occur within CMC. To date, a handful of scholars have drawn upon Habermas' metatheories of communication action/ discourse ethics and the public sphere to explore online dialogue (e.g., Brothers, 2000; Ess, 1996; 2000; Ess and Cavalier, 1996; Fang, 1997; Herring, 1993; Schneider, 1997; Yates, 2001). However, despite important insights offered by these studies, most implicitly or explicitly emphasize a view of communication that downplays grounded time-space-bounded dialogic processes.

In this paper, we draw upon recent theory that foregrounds communication as a process by focusing on dialogic verbings (energizings) that occur within Habermasian-style electronic public spheres. In particular, we ask two research questions: "How might dialogic processes within electronic discussion groups be reconceptualized as verbings?" and "What light can verbings shed on time-space contextualized processes occurring within electronic public spheres?" To answer these questions, we first discuss components of Habermas' theory of communicative action and Giddens' theory of structuration useful for explicating dialogic processes within electronic public spheres. We then draw upon Sense-Making Methodology's (Dervin, 1999) communication-as-procedure framework (Dervin and Clark, 1993) to propose a verbing template that specifically zooms in on grounded dialogic processes. We conclude by providing illustrations gathered from a brief analysis of three pedagogical discussion groups in which participants discussed controversial issues related to racism and cultural studies [1].

Communicative action and structuration: the importance of human agency for structural processes

As suggested by Layder (1994), recent developments in social theory have served to highlight both (a) the centrality of communicative action in public spheres and (b) the importance of human agency in the maintenance/transformation of social structures. We now briefly discuss

these developments in order to better explicate dialogue within the production/reproduction of social structures.

Communicative action and the dialogic turn. One of the major influences upon dialogic theory in recent years has been Habermas' theory of communicative action and the public sphere. Habermas (1962/1989) first advanced his arguments in *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, originally published in 1962. Habermas asserted that Enlightenment-era citizens—fueled by the diffusion of books, literacy, and education—began to meet in public British coffee houses, French salons, and German Table Societies to discuss art, literature, and poetry—and, ultimately, public policy. Advancing their skill in rational-critical discourse, citizens developed the capacity to challenge the legitimacy of the ruling monarchies, resulting in legal codification of free speech principles and the emergence of modern/democratic nation states. Habermas suggests, however, that in the nineteenth century, public sphere participation was replaced by mass mediated spectatorship, creating a sham public sphere. The book ended rather pessimistically, with Habermas (1989) implying that the only hope would be the reconnection of “intraorganizational public spheres . . . [with] the informal domain of . . . nonpublic opinions” (pp. 249-250).

Despite its pessimism, the publication of Habermas' book in English in 1989—coupled with the emergence of multiple volumes on communicative action in the 1970s and 1980s (Habermas, 1979, 1984, 1987, 1990)—sparked a surge of interest in communicative action theory: several conferences were held and volumes of criticism published (e.g., Black Public Sphere Collective, 1995; Calhoun, 1992; Honneth and Joas, 1991; and Robbins, 1993, among others). Central to Habermas' theories—and the object of much criticism—was the notion of an *ideal speech situation*: a counterfactual model suggesting that participants presupposed that a fair compromise could be reached before they engaged in communicative action within a constraint-free environment. The model served as an ideal type against which all concrete communicative practices could be evaluated.

Thus, Habermasian communicative action affirmed the centrality of human communicative action within social processes. However, as noted by Schaefer (2001), additional dimensions of dialogue that were directly or indirectly drawn upon in Habermas' theories were explicated by other theorists. These dimensions included direct engagement/intersubjectivity, perspective-taking, and empathy.

Direct engagement/intersubjectivity. One important influence on Habermas was Schutz (1932/1967), who asserted that each person's personal stream of consciousness was “essentially inaccessible to every other individual” (p. 99). However, two actors together could dialogically create moments of intersubjectivity—a simultaneous merging of streams of consciousness. Schutz argued that the “Thou-orientation” involved shared time-space communities:

He [sic] shares a community of space with me when he is present in person and I am aware of him as such, and, moreover, when I am aware of him as this person *himself*, this *particular* individual, and of his body as the field upon which play the symptoms of his inner consciousness. He shares a community of time with me when his experience is flowing side by side with mine, when I can at any moment look over and grasp his

thoughts as they come into being, in other words, when we are growing older together. (Schutz, 1932/1967, p. 163)

Schutz (1932/1967) contrasted the Thou-orientation with the They-orientation in which the communicator perceived others as anonymous *ideal types* outside of shared time-space, typically leading to the development of stereotypes, generalizations, etc.

Empathy and Perspective-Taking. Two additional dialogic processes that were acknowledged as key to communicative action were empathy and perspective-taking. Bjorkqvist and Osterman (2000) noted that the term *empathy*—the “sharing of perceived emotion of another” (p. 193)—originated in Germany as *Eingefuhlung*, which was conceptually distinguished from *Mitgefuhlung* (*sympathy*—“the willingness to alleviate the sufferings of another,” p. 193). They pointed out that Titchener first used the term in North America in 1909 after doing research in Germany.

Prevalent definitions of empathy emphasized both emotional and cognitive elements. Emotional components included emotional synchrony, involvement, and identification; cognitive elements concerned processes of perspective-taking. Bjorkqvist and Osterman (2000) identified three components of empathy: (a) perception of emotions, (b) “emotional responsiveness” (e.g., the “ability to share another’s feelings,” p. 193), and (c) perspective/role-taking (e.g., seeing another’s viewpoint). Thornton and Thornton (1995) identified five factors of empathy: (a) empathic concern for others, (b) empathic distress, a dysfunctional component conceived of as “calm coping” (p. 766), (c) fantasy involvement with fictional characters, (d) emotionally synchronizing with others, and (e) perspective-taking. Rogers (1980) defined empathy as the:

means [of] entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it. It involves being sensitive, moment by moment, to the changing felt meanings which flow in this other person It means frequently checking with the person as to the accuracy of your sensings, and being guided by the responses you receive. . . (142).

Thus, the work of the preceding theorists explicated dimensions of communicative action, intersubjectivity, and empathy/perspective-taking useful for understanding dialogic processes within a variety of communicative contexts.

Additionally, Giddens’ theory of structuration shed additional light on the role of communicative processes in structural production/reproduction.

Structuration: the importance of human agency in the constitution of social structures.

Layder (1994) noted that a second major influence on contemporary social theory is Giddens’ (1984) theory of structuration. Giddens’ (1984) posited that social structures were virtual—existing outside of time and space but invoked through human memory traces or action within time-space contexts. Both agency and structure were inextricably intertwined in an ongoing duality. Further, human action produced/reproduced three structural processes: (a) signification (e.g., language or other symbol systems), legitimation (e.g., norms, laws, sanctions), and (c) domination (e.g., power over resources). These structures were produced/reproduced as agents

recursively drew upon/sustained/created rules and resources, including allocative (control of materials) and authoritative (control of other agents) resources.

Importantly, Giddens suggested that communicative processes involved the highest forms of human consciousness. Giddens (1984) conceptualized cognitive processes on three levels: (a) unconscious/repressed motives that evaded awareness but impacted daily routines/procedures, (b) practical consciousness—the agent’s knowledgeability about the social conditions and action rules that could not be expressed verbally, and (c) discursive consciousness—the agent’s ability to provide verbal descriptions of social conditions and reasons for his/her actions. He asserted that all humans were social theorists, “reading” the structures that surround them and seeking to influence their production/reproduction.

Thus, communicative competencies played a central role in structuration theory and involved three key skills: (a) self-monitoring, (b) self-reflexivity, and (c) praxis/conscientization. Self-monitoring—awareness of one’s day-to-day situational and emotional experiences, particularly within the context of one’s life narrative—was a necessary precondition for successful interpersonal interaction. It included self-growth—the ability to place one’s life experiences within the duree of daily life and chart one’s path toward life goals. At a higher level of competence, self-reflexivity was defined as the agent’s ability to connect daily life practices to larger social-structural conditions and outcomes, or, as Silverstone and Haddon (1996) put it, “the capacity of participants in social life to think about and reflect upon the nature of their actions and the conditions under which they are pursued” (pp. 57-58). The highest level of competence, however, was praxis—reflexive action involving action: an agent’s ability to “structure the trajectories” (Mansell and Silverstone, 1996, p. 2) of social systems. Friere (1970) called this competence *conscientization*, arguing that it stood at the apex of human communicative achievement:

Men [sic], as beings “in a situation,” find themselves rooted in temporal-spatial conditions which mark them and which they also mark. They will tend to reflect on their own “situationality” to the extent that they are challenged by it to act upon it. Men *are* because they *are* in a situation. And they *will be more* the more they not only critically reflect upon their existence but *critically act upon it* [emphasis added]. . . .
Conscientizacao [conscientization] is the deepening of the attitude of awareness characteristic of all emergence [italics in original]. (pp. 100-101)

Thus, structuration theory reasserted the importance of agency—particularly communicative processes related to discursive consciousness—on the production/reproduction of social structures.

The influence of communicative action and structuration theories on CMC research

In the 1980s and 1990s, researchers turned to both communicative action and structuration theories when conceptualizing dialogic practice within CMC. First, researchers studying emergent (unstructured) CMC environments found Habermas’ communicative action/public sphere theories particularly appealing. Numerous studies utilized communicative action frameworks (see Brothers, 2000; Dietz and Widdershoven, 1991; Ess, 1996; 2000; Ess and

Cavalier, 1996; Fang, 1997; Herring, 1993; Lyytinen and Ngwenyama, 1999; Ngwenyama and Lyytinen, 1997; Radin, 1996; Rheingold, 1993; Sharrock and Button, 1997; Schneider, 1997; Winograd and Flores, 1987; Yates, 2001). For example, Ess and Cavalier (1996) asserted that

some communicative phenomena emerging in CMC environments (primarily, the Internet) indeed fulfill the criteria of Habermasian democracy, suggesting that the new technologies may be democratizing in a carefully defined sense By constraining . . . use [of CMC] along the lines of a discourse ethics, in short, we are more likely to fulfill the democratization promise. (p. 2)

Schneider (1997) argued that a CMC discussion group “can be evaluated for its goodness of fit with the idealized public sphere defined by Habermas . . . “ (p. 101).

However, the research methodologies typically employed either (a) relied upon metatheoretical frameworks that remained far removed from actual dialogic processes or (b) utilized empirical approaches (e.g., word counts/choice; occurrences of flaming; demographic analyses) that focused on quantitative measures while eschewing larger metatheoretical issues. For example, in Fang’s (1997) analysis of the validity claims used in several discussion lists, he raises many important metatheoretical issues but does not ground these issues adequately in his empirical findings. On the other hand, Schneider (1997) utilized an arsenal of highly quantitative measures to assess the newsgroup Talk.Abortion along four dimensions: equality of access/participation, diversity of authors/views presented, reciprocity among authors, and quality of the discourse. However, his findings remained merely descriptive: he refrained from connecting key discoveries (e.g., the monopolization of the group by a small number of participants) to metatheoretical issues like systemic colonization, hegemony, and like.

A genre of CMC research that drew heavily upon Giddens’ structuration was “adaptive structuration,” a framework for assessing the “mutual influence of technology and social processes” (Majchrzak, Rice, Malhotra, King, and Ba, 2000, p. 570). Adaptive structuration was used to study technology adoption or group decision support system-based (GDSS) processes within organizational contexts (see Chidambaram, Bostrom, and Wynne, 1990; Fulk, 1993; Majchrzak, et al., 2000; Poole and DeSanctis, 1992; Poole, Holmes, Watson, and DeSanctis, 1993). However, despite researcher emphasis upon *process*, most studies focused upon noun-conceptualized process variables—“the nature of the decision task, group size, group composition, time pressure, and potential for conflict among group members” (Poole et. al, 1993, p. 197)—or outcomes: group consensus, satisfaction levels, decision quality, etc. Further, adaptive structuration studies generally eschewed analysis of dialogic processes, focusing instead on group-based interaction variables.

Thus, despite the popularity of communicative action and structuration theories within CMC, researchers working in both genres tended to adopt a communication-as-noun perspective in their research designs. Since communicative structures are instantiated moment-by-moment via the engines of human agency, attempts to conceptualize them as fixed, noun-like, entities divorced them from human origins—in essence, reifying them. Left unstudied were the grounded dialogic processes that constituted CMC-based public spheres. Indeed, after a thorough review of dialogic research over the past several decades, Cissna and Anderson (1998) concluded that “[d]espite an

abundance of dialogic literature, no contemporary account with which we are familiar explicitly theorizes dialogue as a momentary phenomenon and discusses its implications by relying on such a foundation” (p. 67). Additionally, Verstaeten (1996) criticized metatheoretical public sphere research for remaining disconnected from grounded communicative action, pointing out that the:

dynamics of the public sphere [could] only be understood if one also considers the micro-level: a public sphere will only come about as a result of ‘a sense-making process’ realized by concrete individuals in their day-to-day reality . . . Habermas did not look sufficiently into this process. (p. 350)

Verstaeten (1996) has called for the development of public sphere dynamics that focus specifically on grounded time-space interactions as a means of reconnecting theory and action.

Thus, an alternative approach is needed, particularly one that acknowledges human agents as social actors inextricable involved in the time-space bound production/reproduction of social structures.

Sense-Making Methodology and verbings

Sense-Making Methodology (Dervin, 1999) provides both metatheoretical and empirical frameworks for explicating dialogic processes within online discussion groups. Sense-Making Methodology (1983; 1999) posits as its core premise the gappiness/discontinuity of reality, which mandates human agents to continually bridge gaps via time-space situated cognitive, behavioral, emotional, or spiritual practices [2]. These practices constitute the “hows”—or *verbings*—of communicating by which individuals move through time-space. Hence, the focus within communication research is shifted from a study of nouns—e.g., senders, receivers, effects—to *verbs*—communication processes by which human make/unmake bridges over gaps.

Thus, Sense-Making Methodology’s focus on “time, space, movement, and gap” (Dervin, 1999, p. 46) is represented by a gap-bridging metaphor. The metaphor mandates that researchers explore four key gap-bridging dimensions: (a) situations—time-space anchored moments where agents find themselves blocked, stopped, or hindered; (b) gaps—the questions, confusions, and muddles agents experience; (c) bridges—the cognitive/emotive/spiritual procedures the agent uses to construct/deconstruct sense; and (d) outcomes/uses—the helps/hurts agents receive in the situation.

One innovation based upon Sense-Making Methodology has been the development of the communication-as-procedure framework—a metatheoretical template useful for studying grounded communicative practices (Dervin and Clark, 1993; Clark, 1999). The framework mandates a focus upon verbings enacted moment-by-moment by human agents within specific contexts. Using verbings, researchers can observe dynamic communicative practices that connect human agency and social structure.

Drawing heavily on the theoretic inventions of Carter (see Carter, 1988; 1991; in press), Dervin and Clark (1993) offer as examples two sets of verbing metacategories: (a) situation-defining

strategies and (b) communicating tactics. Situation-defining strategies are relational verbings that (a) connect an individual to self, to others, or to collectivities or (b) connect a collectivity to itself, to individuals, or to other collectivities. Communicating tactics are general categories of communicatings utilized conjointly with relational strategies: attending, creating ideas, connecting, confronting, opposing, mediating, recalling, undoing rigidities, emotings, etc. At the intersection of each situation-defining strategy and communication tactic, one finds specific micro-practices. Dervin and Clark (1993) propose the communication-as-procedure framework as a generalizeable tool for conceptualizing verbing analytics pertinent to any research domain. They offer multiple verbings as exemplars but suggest that researchers develop their own analytics tailored to individual research designs.

Thus, the communication-as-procedure framework seems particularly well suited to answer recent challenges to reconceptualize online communicative action as ongoing human processes (see Braman, 1994; Brothers, 2000; Cissna and Anderson, 1990; Cissna and Anderson, 1998; Eisenberg, 1994; Ess, 1996; Whitworth, Gallupe, and McQueen, 2000).

In order to demonstrate the utilization of a verbing template for the analysis of online dialogues, we now provide a brief illustration using data from a recent study (Schaefer, 2001).

Data collection and rationale.

Data was collected from three pedagogical electronic public spheres conducted at a large, Midwestern university in 1999 and 2000. The purpose of these groups was to provide an environment where students could dialogue about controversial issues related to course content—racism and popular/elite culture. The participants were mainly undergraduate and graduate students attending the courses for credit. Academic discussion groups were chosen for analysis because, following Dewey (1916/1966), Ess (2000), and Ess and Cavalier (1996), we argued that public educational institutions played a primary role in fostering the dialogic skills necessary for effective participant in public spheres. As Friere (1970) argued, one of the primary tasks of education was to help people learn how to “dialogue with [others] about their view and ours” (p. 85). Further, such arguments have become popular in the Deweyian, neopragmatist educational reform movement that draws upon Habermasian discourse ethics/communicative action (Englund, 2000; Lakeland, 1993; Lehmann-Rommel, 2000). For example, Gutmann and Thompson asserted that:

[i]n any effort to make democracy more deliberative, the single most important institution outside government is the educational system. . . Schools should aim to develop their students’ capacities to understand different perspectives, communicate their understandings to other people, and engage in the give-and-take of moral argument with a view to making mutually acceptable decisions. (cited in Englund, 2000, p. 311)

Thus, the choice of pedagogical discussion groups for the analysis of online public sphere verbings was an appropriate one.

In the three courses, all exercises were based upon the Sense-Making metaphor. These included (a) weekly feedback sheets requiring students to connect course content to their personal

situations; (b) in-class dialogic rounds using a “talking stick” procedure (each student used the metaphor to discuss the relevance of readings, etc. to their lives); (c) Sense-Making Micro-Moment and Micro-Element Time-Line interviews of self and others; and (d) web-based discussion groups. The online discussion groups provided the raw data for this study: students discussed controversial topics related to racism and cultural studies (e.g., affirmative action; reverse racism; slavery reparations; the Columbine High School massacre, gender-based media stereotyping, media influence).

Overall, 124 participants contributed 1,360 messages over a thirty-week period (an average of 45.3 messages per week). All students were informed of the purpose of the research and were asked to sign consent forms giving permission for use of their contributions in published research. Students were free to withdraw their consent at any time; students who participated were given a small extra credit point incentive. The groups were not moderated, although participants were allowed to edit their entries after submitting them to the database.

Coding operations.

The study utilized a hybrid quantitative-qualitative research design based on Yin’s (1989) case study method. The unit of analysis was defined as the individual posting—a specific, time-space bound communicative moment.

Following Crabtree and Miller (1992), the codebook was developed iteratively. First, a preliminary codebook was designed based on a literature review focusing on dialogue, communicative action, and conceptual/empirical Sense-Making research (in particular, Dervin and Clark, 1993 and Dervin et. al, 1993; Higgins, 1994; Higgins, 1999; and Schaefer, 1999). This version of the codebook was then tested on two systematic random samples of 10% of the postings. Once the codes stabilized, the final codebook was tested for intracoder and intercoder reliability; all codes were found to have a reliability coefficient of .80 or higher, using the percentage of agreement between coders, adjusted for chance agreement (Krippendorff, 1980; Miles and Huberman, 1994).

The final coding template included eleven verbings, which were operationally defined as follows:

Situatings—references to time-space specific, personal, lived experiences:

- I remember one time at a sports camp I was attending, that some of the other boys started to mock and ridicule me over some interest that I showed in a black girl who was attending the same camp (“Corban”)

Emotings—references to self-emotions or the actual use of emotional terms, expressive characters, emoticons, and the like:

- I hate racism (“Green”)

Self-growings—references to self-growings, learnings, awarenessings, or realizations related to their own life project:

- This helped me more to appreciate my mother (“Carmen”)

Engagings—references to/about other discussion groups participants/postings:

- What does “long row to hoe” mean? -stated on line 20 [of the previous post] (“Joe”)

Perspectivings—references to the viewpoints, perspectives, or words of other participants:

- For Carmen, making that decision [sic] had to be really difficult . . .” (“Lock”)

Empathyings—references to other participant’s emotions or use of emotional terms, expressive characters, or emoticons:

- So, in that case you should never feel BAD that your contributions to class are not necessarily the SAME as everyone else (“Pegleg”)

Generalizings—commentings that feature stereotyped, essentialized remarks about society or groups of people that lack social critique, suggested homogeneity, and include group factizings/labelings:

- In fact, I would argue that the reason we have such a problem with family ties and quality relationships is the television and other media like it (“Kalba”).

Reflectings—commentings that include social critique—connecting self to societal conditions and structures, often focused on the participant’s relation to these structures

- I never really realized how oppressed these Phillipinos were (“Joe”)

Conscientizings—verbings in which participants referred to actions they have taken or would take to change a critiqued social structure:

- I went to Take Back the Night tonight . . . and wow I am glad I did It was awesome marching with hundreds of diverse women who have one thing in common . . . all against violence against women, children, and men (“scatterd”)

Consensusings—stated agreeings/accordings with other participants’ observations, perspectives, or discussions

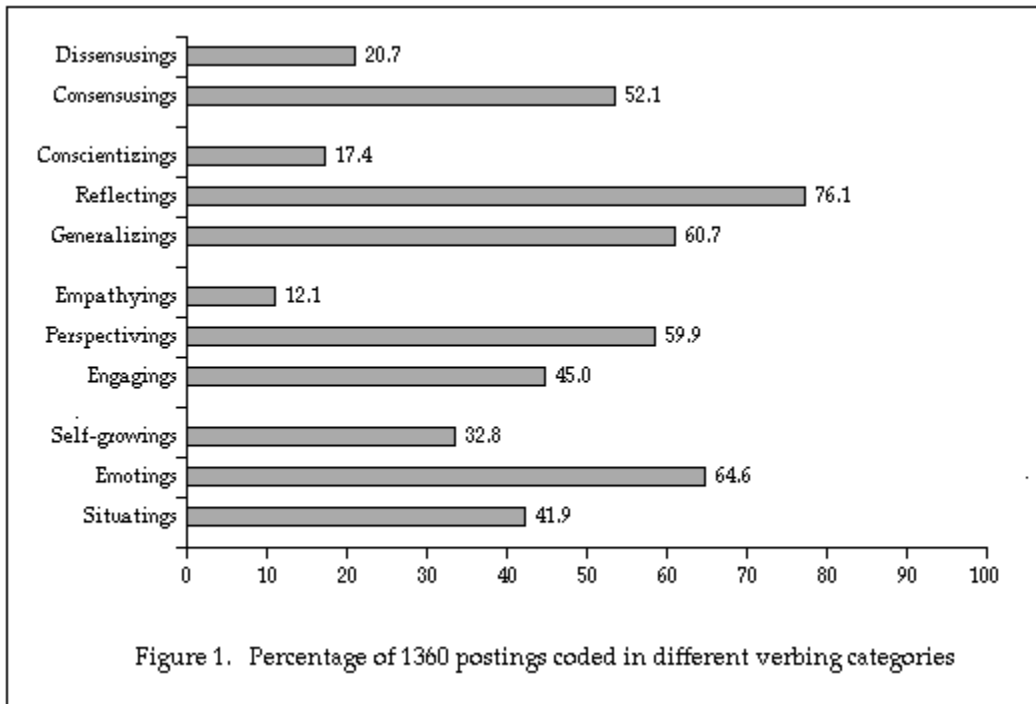
- I enjoyed the class discussion that we had regarding the piece entitled ‘culture and communication’ by Alan O’Conner (“Aries”)

Dissensusings—verbings in which participants stated disagreeings or discordings with the observations, perspectives, or discussions of other participants:

- First of all I felt that sunshine’s bash on students that go out was a little to harsh (“Lucy”)

Results

As illustrated in Figure 1, the final verbing percentages revealed two key findings. First, there was a high prevalence of the kinds of verbings that would be expected in a pedagogical public sphere focused on controversial issues: reflectings (76.1%), emotings (64.6%), generalizings (60.7%), and perspectivings (59.9%). This suggests that participants actively sought to critique social structures by connecting their observations to their own lives (reflectings). They also frequently referred to self-emotions or used emotional terms (emotings), offered stereotyped, essentialized commentings about groups of people (generalizings), and referred to the viewpoints, perspectives, or words of other participants (perspectivings).



More intriguing were the low levels of empathyings (12.1%), conscientizings (17.4%), and dissensusings (20.7%) that emerged in the postings. Although there was a high level of perspectivings, participants rarely engaged in empathyings—acknowledging the emotions of others. This was particularly interesting given that many of the participants emoted within their own postings; acknowledgement of these emotings by others was generally not reproduced in the spheres.

Further, given that structuration theory suggests that conscientization (actions taken to change social structures) requires the highest level of communicative competencies, it was not surprising that only about one in five postings included this verbing. However, it did indicate that a major gap existed for most participants between reflecting upon one's place within social structures and *acting to change those structures*.

Also interesting was the relatively low level of dissensusing (disagreeings/discordings with the perspectives /viewpoints of other participants) that occurred within the spheres. However, as infrequent as this verbing appeared to be, it was not out of line with past research that reported a predominance of consensual/cohesional forces within online communities (except in spheres specifically devoted to disagreements like alt.flame [see Schaefer, 2000]). Coupled with the fact that consensusing (agreeings/accordings with the perspective/viewpoints of other participants) occurred in slightly more than half of the postings (52.1%), this interpretation seems likely.

Beyond the quantitative findings, the verbing template allowed us to look specifically at how participants were producing/reproducing social structures within the public spheres. For example, given that reflectings occurred in 76.1% of the postings, we then examined individual postings to see how participants actively connected their own lives to critiques of social-structural conditions and outcomes. Such verbings indicated that participants often shifted personal observations to discursive levels of consciousness, then offered them to the discussion group for observation by others.

In one such posting, "Larry" verbalized criticism of racist social structures that s/he experience in a recent shopping trip:

I would like to share a racist experience that I recently had. I went to [a local] Mall this past summer and I went to [a department store] in search of cosmetics [3] that I usually buy there. Not at this particular [department store] but others. The associate informed me that they did nay carry a black cosmetic line there at [the local mall]. I was shocked I was just surprised that this brand new mall was not equipped with a black cosmetic line in the [department] store. All the other [department stores] carried it It would have helped if they had carried at least one black cosmetic line. I think this is a racial issue.

Although Larry appeared to still be stuck in the gap—shocked over a perceived racial injustice promoted by a local department store—the posting allowed her/him to “share” this experience with others, perhaps as a means of alerting others to the store's racist practices. Clearly, Larry demonstrating self-reflexivity: “the capacity of participants in social life to think about and reflect upon the nature of their actions and the conditions under which they are pursued” (Silverstone and Haddon, 1996, pp. 57-58).

Another example by “Sallydrew” further demonstrated self-reflexivity—in this case, a personalized struggle with social beliefs about minority community members:

. . . . The conversation started after I picked my brother up from football practice and had to drop off a black kid at his home. This then started the conversation of how many blacks were at the high school. I was astounded when my brother said about thirty,

because only five years earlier, when I was in high school, there were none. I immediately had those bad feelings about whether or not the black kids came from money.... Perhaps if I had grown up in a different, more diverse environment, I would not have had these feelings. But I was constantly hearing when I was growing up that the majority of the blacks did not keep their property up. My grandma was from the city whereas I was from rural area—and she would talk about the bad “black” neighborhoods constantly. Perhaps if I had come from a more diverse area, I would not have been so concerned with money. I had this fear that if the blacks started moving in that everyone’s property value would go down.

In this posting, Sallydrew both situated and emoted while reflecting upon her/his own reaction to racial issues—in this case, struggling with “bad feelings” while attempting to critique the thoughts that brought about those feelings—her/his own concern about an increase in “black” students at a high school. Sallydrew also appeared to be stuck in the gap (the bad feelings; concern over a decline in property values); s/he connected these thoughts to awareness of conditions/experiences when growing up, but did not conscientize (e.g., declaring action that s/he would take to stop these “bad feelings” in the future).

Thus, the prevalence of reflectings, then, suggested that the online public spheres were useful for encouraging participants to promote awareness—but not action—of their own experiences with racist structures.

However, despite the relatively low prevalence of empathyings, conscientizings, and dissensusings within the postings, those that did include these verbings illustrated the *potential* for dialogic interactions to have an impact upon social change. For example, by critiquing a previous posting (about the racial views of Thomas Jefferson), “Madison” was prompted to conscientize—verbalize a personal action s/he would *not* take in order to keep a racist structure from reproducing:

The above is a well written response. However, I’m not so sure their really is such a big difference between beliefs and accomplishments. . . . What if slavery did not happen in spite of the accomplishments of the “founding fathers,” but was central to these accomplishments?.... I think it’s a common feature of our culture that people still separate their beliefs and their actions as a way to allow one to excuse the other. How often do you think people who commit racist actions say to themselves “Yes, but I don’t really believe in racism.” People are questioning Clinton because of his “sex scandal,” but Jefferson had children with people he owned’. Thinking about this helps and hinders me. On the one hand, I would like to think that people in positions of power who have racist beliefs might be able to accomplish great things in spite of them, but on the other hand, I can’t help feeling that these are impossible to separate. For example, I would never vote for David Duke, no matter what “great accomplishments” he might be able to attain.

In a final example, “Bubbles”—also prompted by a previous posting—consented with its author about a similar life experience, then discussed similarities/differences between the two situations. S/he concluded by conscientizing—reaffirming her resolve to “take a stance” against unjust social structures even though it may be difficult to do so:

Leigh, I want to commend you for sharing your experience and no longer affiliating with the sorority you mentioned. I think that it was very honorable of you not to put aside your feelings and beliefs in order to conform to the group. I am sure it was a difficult decision for you to make, but I think you realize now that you definitely made the right decision Your experience connects to my life because I have witnessed the same thing myself. However, the difference was that a friend of mine who is a minority was pledging for a sorority. She was the only non-white pledge. We were out one night with some of her future sorority sisters and I overheard them making some racist comments about my friend. I was put in a difficult position because I did not want to hurt my friend by telling her what I had overheard. Although she was upset at first, she thanks me for my honesty today It helps to hear about the experiences of others. Even in the most difficult situations it is important to follow what you believe. Even when the easiest thing to do might be to just ignore the situation and keep quiet, it is important to take a stance.

Thus, although postings exhibiting empathyings, conscientizings, and dissensusings were the least frequently occurring in the discussions, they illustrated the potential of participants in the online discussions to connect interrogations of unjust social structures with dialogues about personal actions they would take to change critiqued structures.

Conclusion: Zooming in on verbings within electronic public spheres

In the past decade, research examining the forms and processes within electronic public spheres has become highly prevalent. Most of these studies, however, only weakly connect metatheory and grounded dialogic practice. In this paper, we asked two research questions: “How might dialogic processes within electronic discussion groups be reconceptualized as verbings?” and “What light can verbings shed on time-space contextualized processes occurring within electronic public spheres?” To answer these questions, we drew upon Sense-Making Methodology’s communication-as-procedure framework to propose a verbing template for the analysis of dialogue within CMC. We offered as exemplar a brief analysis of 1,360 postings drawn from three public spheres devoted to issues of race and cultural studies. The verbings allowed us to zoom in on time-space specific dialogic practices that produce/reproduce social structures. We found that the groups exhibited a lot of reflecting, generalizing, emoting, and perspectiving, but were much less likely to engage in empathyings, conscientizings, or dissensusings, suggesting that these skills may have indicated higher-level discursive competencies that required more complex communicative competencies. However, postings that did exhibit empathyings, conscientizings, or dissensusings often pointed to structural processes in which participants verbalized actions designed to change critiqued social structures.

Thus, by rethinking online dialogue in terms of dynamic verbings rather than traditional noun-variables (e.g., length of postings, numbers of participants, demographic features, etc.), we have illustrated a methodological lens for zooming in on concretized communicative actions that produce/reproduce social structures in bounded time-space contexts. We suggest that verbing analysis directly addresses recent calls for identifying and exploring micro-practices that connect agency and structure within public spheres. Of course, the findings presented here are preliminary, based upon a much larger study (see Schaefer, 2001). Additional research is needed to examine the relative prevalence of verbings within other public sphere contexts. However,

given the increasing pervasiveness of Internet technologies and opportunities for engaging in multicultural dialogues, we suggest that verbing analysis allows researchers to look more closely at dialogic micro-practices that constitute electronic public spheres.

ENDNOTES

[1] The template and findings reported in this paper are based upon dissertation research reported in Schaefer (2001). Interested readers are directed to this source for additional discussion and examples.

[2] In developing Sense-Making Methodology, Dervin has drawn heavily on the work of Carter and also Bourdieu, Bruner, Buber, Dewey, Foucault, Freire, Giddens, Habermas, McGuire, and others. See the reference list for a selection of foundational citations.

[3] Original spelling. Rather than peppering posting exemplars with [sic], we did not alter spelling/grammatical content, although we indicated sections or omissions within each posting with ellipses [. . .] .

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