

NARRATIVES COUNTERING THE DEMOCRATISING IDEAL OF DISCOURSE IN AN ONLINE FORUM OF A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION

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Abstract. This paper describes power inequalities among participants in an online forum at a higher education institution in South Africa. Critical poststructuralist theory informs the study as it investigates how hegemony influences the strategic interaction of participants. An interpretive analysis uncovered elements of a cyclic process of intensified exclusion, inequality and oppression. This took place within a virtual space which is theoretically idealized as an equalizer and promoter of freedom of speech. The process involved in the eliciting of voices is described and the interpretation of subjective accounts tells of the disillusioned experiences of a potential liberating form of technology. Instead of alleviating conflict, the potential of the online forum is subverted and intensifies the alienation of and animosity between participants. Proposals for moderation are made to change the forum to a democratic, inclusive space.

1. Introduction

Some information systems designers and theorists construct an idealistic view of effecting equality and democracy through information technology. They propose that a virtual environment supports and is designed by the principles of an open, free and democratic society (Mcguire, Kiesler, & Siegel, 1987), that it is an equal space where honest opinions can be expressed freely (Fernback, 1997; Sproull & Kiesler, 1991) and that because the space is online participants are more likely to speak their minds, as they cannot experience the readers' reactions face to face (Moor, 2007). According to (O'Sullivan & Flanagan, 2003) reduced social cues can result in greater equality in participation and a reduction of status related differences.

Other experts in the field of information technology maintain that the potential inherent in online spaces can be used in less than ideal ways. Cecez-Kecmanovic *et al.* (1999) report how a university brought about organizational change by a seemingly democratic process of consulting faculty through the use of the internet and email, but the eventual decisions were made while expressed concerns were ignored. Consulting through email and the internet, therefore, only appeared democratic and gave a superficial air of managerial care.

Higher education institutions (HEIs) do not escape reproducing discourse domination by making use of internet technology. Information technology is expected to contribute to and be instrumental in the democratization of the university, through such avenues as encouraging and promoting free speech. However, the potential inherent in these technologies can create a lack of transparency, inequality and domination, all of which are not only characteristic of undemocratic management styles, but are also experienced in oppressing interactions amongst employees. The narrative countering the presumed idealism inherent in online discussions is consequently researched in the case study which is here described.

Academic members at an HEI in South Africa established an online forum to voice their opinions about issues such as the impact and expectations of socio-political change on a former mono-cultural university. One of the changes included the merging of two previous independent universities into one institution. Within the larger institution, the three campuses with their distinct and diverse student demographics, provide a fair representation of the different cultures of the country. One campus in an industrialized area became predominantly black and represented students from a diversity of ethnic groups (Zulu, Sotho, Tswana), one campus in the former apartheid homeland of Bophutatswana remained predominantly black and consisted of a large group of Tswana-speaking students, and one remained predominantly white and consisted of a majority of students whose home language is Afrikaans (a language which has developed in South Africa since 1600, mainly from Dutch origin).

Although the forum had been created on the former "white campus", employees from the larger institution have access to it. Perspectives from opposite sides of the political spectrum appeared in the online discussions. Employees with nostalgic views about the dispensation before the governmental change to democracy (1994) represent a conservative, and often a cataclysmic view of the socio-political transformation of the university and the country. These views are declaratively stated and consequently opposed by liberal participants with pro-transformation views on the forum, while the

more moderate voices do not have a pervasive presence on the forum. Apart from the fact that the forum eventually featured mainly opposing views, it ideally offered the opportunity for any employee, whether academic or administrative, to share opinions online. It also served as an alternative space where issues could be raised which had no channels for expression elsewhere. The opportunity to practice free speech and interact with colleagues in an equal space ideally provided unlimited potential for free expression.

This paper describes the divergent motivations, perceptions and interactions of participants in this online forum, named “Have your say.” Theory concerning the hindrances and opportunities to change this forum to a democratic space, is built from an analysis of the subjective accounts and perceptions of participants about their interactions on the forum and the offline consequences of their online participation. The objective is to understand the subjective positions of the participants as they interact, as they assume and experience interventions and stances of oppression in their presentation of issues, arguments and experiences through the forum text, and also through their reflections on their participation in interviews with the researcher.

The philosophy inherent in the interpretation and theoretical framework of critical theory is the foundation of the study and also influences the findings and hypotheses formulated at the end of the analysis. The criteria set by critical poststructuralist theory, which informs this study, stress subjectivity, emotionality and feeling (Denzin, 1999) elements which are acknowledged, advocated and regarded as prerequisites by Young (2000) in the attainment of democracy through discourse, as they describe the situatedness of participants and lead to an understanding of their positions.

The paper is divided into three sections: a discussion of the choices in the selection of participants and the considerations which determined the interviews, a presentation of the findings and proposals for the formation of a democratic online forum.

2. The Collection of Data

In this section the considerations of the researchers are discussed in their choices of participants, interview style and questions, forum text and offline contextual data. Online and offline data are incorporated in the study, as these offer a holistic picture of the participants and serve as an “expanded ethnography” (Beneito-Montagut, 2011, p. 717).

2.1. CHOICE OF THE THREAD AND THE INTERVIEWEES

The research started with a textual analysis of a thread on the online forum, which a female lecturer introduced and named “Racism, the other side.” This discussion was chosen as it had a considerable number of participations (24) expressing diverse viewpoints and employing different styles of presentation, such as argumentation, relating personal experiences, informative pieces and quotations from newspapers. The participants also comprised people who regularly participated in previous forum discussions, opposing each other in declarative ways, and who had consequently formed prominent identities within the forum.

The forum text can be viewed as a micro-context, while the interviews are part of a larger context and enable the researchers to understand the power which is exerted within and around the discourse (Fairclough, 2003; Wodak, 1996). The online data are procured by an inquiry into the text (the thread), while the offline data (interviews, observations) provide the real life context of participants. The interviews offered the opportunity for participants to recount, in their own terms, how their context influenced the production of their texts. The online and offline data eventually offer “multiple meanings and experiences” (Orgad, 2009, p. 34) that emerge in and around the discussion forum.

2.2. FORMULATION OF QUESTIONS

As the content referred to in the thread and the participants’ reactions on the forum were both of intense emotional quality, the interviewer ensured that the participants did not feel exposed or pressurised to defend their interactions, but rather felt comfortable to reflect on their participation in the forum. The objective was to create a feeling of rapport (Charmaz, 2006) and support in a conversation which resembled a social encounter between the interviewer and interviewee (Packer, 2011). In this sense, the face-to-face environment was quite different from the online environment, being an opportunity for the participant to react more spontaneously than when they constructed their messages on the forum, which ultimately proved to have a competitive and moralistic context. The situations in which the participants expressed their opinions differed in spontaneity and instead of having a reader for their “performance text” (Denzin, 1999; Van Doorn, 2011), they had a face-to-face interviewer which encouraged the spontaneity of the interaction.

If certain consequences to their participations were important enough, participants were asked to relate those incidents. In this respect, the study focuses on narratives as a method of inquiry (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

The participants are referred to by pseudonyms, John, Susan, Stephen and Francois. The first three participants offered their views in the interview on the specific discussion, “Racism, the other side,” while Francois did not participate in the specific thread but his role in the forum is considered to be relevant in exploration of the research question.

3. The Analysis

The structure in Figure 1 shows the strategy of interaction as the central phenomenon in this analysis, as it describes what all the categories relate to. Figure 1 indicates the motivation of a person and the consequence of interaction equally influence the interaction strategies they employ. The interaction strategies are articulated around the identity formed online, the choice of a certain style in which to interact, the perceptions formed of other participants and the role of offline institutional interventions. The motivation for forum participation was defined by a person’s expectations of the forum, personal convictions and personal history. The consequence of participation could be

either to eventually end any interaction online or to pursue participation and to stay involved in the discourse.

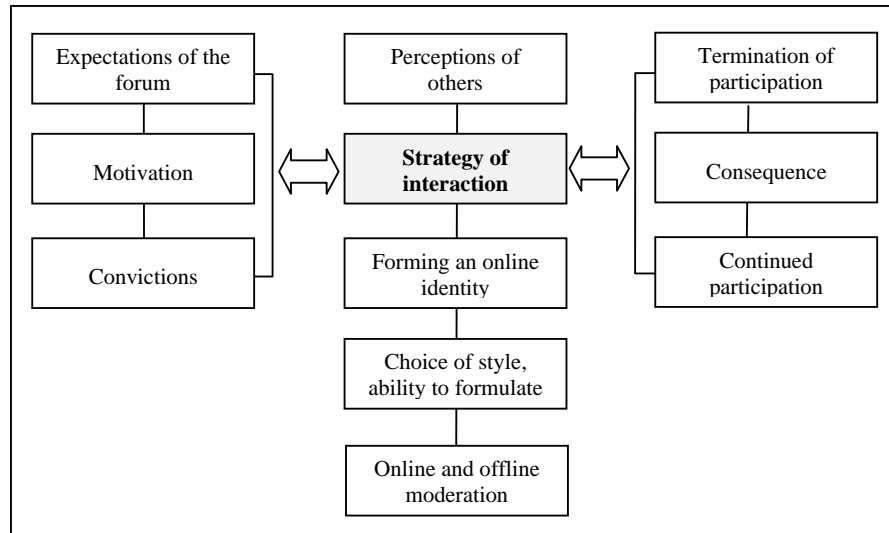


Figure 1. Interrelationship of the categories

In the following section, the paths shown in Figure 1 are applied to the discussion of four participants' online and offline interactions. Participants' titles in the paragraph headings serve as an indication of the identity they constructed for themselves in the forum.

3.1. JOHN: THE CHALLENGER

3.1.1. Strategy of Interaction: Choice of Style→Online Moderation

John adopts a strong confrontational and declarative style in his forum participation (as seen in Table 1, which mirrors the strategy of using oppositional language (you-us, white-black) of the person he addresses and which mirrors the same strong criticism used by the person in her introductory post, titled "Racism, the other side":

With your bitter racist remarks and quasi academic references, Beth, you are opening a can of worms about your and other white colleagues' similar ideas about us, your black colleagues. Your research and convictions do now prove that black people are of a lower cognitive ability than white and Asian people. Your stream of logic (very dubious I have to add) lead me to the conclusion that black colleagues therefore 1. have to be very thankful that we are tolerated on your white, Western piece of pride of a university, 2. are not of the same intellectual ability as white and Asian colleagues 3. must not complain about the racism and other unwanted spin-offs of the western framework of thinking.

The criticism of Beth's "stream of logic" is indicative of John's own online criticism of Beth's participation. This conforms to the forum's context of high internal

criticism and the imposition of own norms, something which Stephen introduces in the thread “Racism the other side” in response to Beth’s post. A certain standard is expected from academic participants, which Beth fails to meet. As Stephen prefers argumentation, he especially expects his opponents to conform to his style of participation, and those who support his line of argument, such as John, also conform to the same form of criticism he practises.

3.1.2. Strategy of Interaction: Online identity→Perceptions of Others→Termination of Participation

John also stresses his political identity as being black and defines the dominant culture of the campus as politically white. John is quite honest in the identity he creates in the forum. He sees himself as a challenger, someone who problematises life and raises issues. He also appreciates strong reactions to his views instead of polite silence which he attributes to members of the dominating culture on the campus:

- John: I just went in with who I am, and I think the impression which people could now get of the identity which they could contribute to me, uhm might be one of an angry person who do not understand the whole...uhm...context of the pace, and not the traditions and culture and not the necessary respect for what is going on here, as a troublemaker, I think that identity could have been formed in the minds of some.
- Researcher: And would you be able to live with that?
- John: No, I am not a troublemaker, I do not see myself like that, I see myself as someone who goes about with life in a critical way, and who troubles things which people find too comfortable, because real life is not such a untroubling, deadening existence.

John equates the white culture to hegemony and regards his white colleagues, in this sense, as representatives of the hegemony he wishes to oppose. When his white colleagues did not meet his expectations by supporting his views on hegemony on the forum, John risked a negative identity attributed to him, as a troublemaker.

The analysis of the quotation which follows, offers a glimpse of the interrelatedness of the categories as shown in Figure 1. John’s offline identity corresponds to his online identity: he perceives himself as a black man in confrontation online and offline with the hegemonic character of the university. He experiences himself to be excluded in two ways, by way of his race, and by way of his opposition to hegemonic practices on and off the forum. He opposes these practices alone and runs the risk of being identified with causing trouble and creating conflict on the forum. He opposes hegemonic practices without the supportive participation of his white colleagues on the forum. His expectations of his colleagues offline are therefore not met online and he consequently ends his participation:

I saw that my colleagues, who share verbally with me the stuff that I am writing, but they do not participate themselves...and I told them, how will I, who carry the mark of an outsider, although I am an insider here by virtue of my employment here, how will I as outsider ever touch people in their deepest being with the stuff I am writing, because I can be brassed off as a bitter, young black little man...not part of the dominating Afrikaans culture, culture is a dirty word, let’s say hegemony...so I started writing less,

because I saw that personally the hegemony, which they say they do not support, the oppressive and exclusionary types of practices and declarations, that they do not write, and well, let me stop writing, let the Afrikaners [white descendants of mainly Dutch and other European settlers sic] fight among themselves...and the lone Englishman, Stephen, let him, he has time to write, I did anyway not have that much time to write.

The hesitance of John's colleagues to support him online might be ascribed to the style of interaction he employs in his participation. He does also not seem to be critical of the style he employs.

3.1.3. *Motivation*→*Strategy of Interaction*

This category groups the data which relate to John's convictions, which inform his participation in and expectations of the potential of the forum, e.g. as a rectifier of wrongs, as a mouthpiece for social justice. John describes his grounding in and experience of social justice and his sensitivity to political oppression as his motivation for protesting instances of the condoning and practice of hegemony on and off the forum:

What incited me specifically, was when I saw some people, who write on the [forum sic] in a way which is not respectful to others who are not of the same religious background, of their educational level, of their social stature, mmmm yes things like that incited me and, as I came from a strict...not totally strict, good grounding in social justice, and worked and lived before I came here, could not remain quiet, it was like a red rag in front of a bull.

It is a logical deduction that John's history of participation and his personal convictions lead to the choice of a declarative strategy. The "red rag in front of a bull" aptly describes his choice of interaction with Beth, whom he addresses in the thread.

3.2. SUSAN: THE SHARER

3.2.1. *Motivation*→*Choice of Style*→*Consequence*

Susan's style is cautious and corresponds to her motive for participation: she wants to share an experience to test whether her view of an incident which could be interpreted either as racist or rude, is acceptable. Her motivation for this specific interaction is to have clarity about her experience of the incident:

Researcher: Your motive was, you just wanted to throw your story in the pool?

Susan: Throw it in the pool and see what people say, do they experience it too? I wanted an answer, I wanted to see if there are other people who have the same experience and if they...uhm would have reacted the same as I did, and if they would have seen it differently, and what would have been their reaction, was my reaction normal or not?

Susan attributes a therapeutic role to the forum, as the reaction to her telling of the incident also supports her own interpretation. She absolutely resists expressing judgments about racism on the forum as she experiences the topic as very sensitive.

3.2.2. *Expectations of the Forum*

As her demeanour is being marked by cautiousness, Susan does not expect much of the forum other than being a dumping place and outlet for daily frustrations. In her opinion, great expectations of influence on a management level will only undermine the success of the forum:

There are certain things [on the forum] which should be taken seriously [by management sic], but uhm does top management of the university really have time to look around on the [forum sic]? No, they don't.

Having the status of an administrative position, she acknowledges the limited power given to people in her position for alerting management to issues of importance or danger on the forum:

My opinion is, is that, when there is something really important which becomes serious, which one say, almost becomes scary, uhm then it is the administrative staff which brings those things under the attention of managers, so, yes...top management does not have the time to read [the forum sic], but I think administrative staff tell them, go and have a look, go and read quickly...but it is not the forum's place to force decisions, yes, it is not the forum to cause decisions to be made, it will never be a success if that is what people expect [of the forum sic].

Even in her assigning a therapeutic role to the forum, one can intuit the frustration Susan has about the lack of influence the forum has on management:

Susan: It is literary so, stand in a soundproof room and shout...
 Researcher: Do you see the forum like that, as a soundproof room?
 Susan: Yes
 Researcher: Where you can only shout?
 Susan: Yes, a stuffed pillow and hit it, have a pillow fight, get rid of that which...how shall I say, make you angry in a sense, uhm...make you bitter later on, things which you can not...Get it out, get it over with...

In spite of the disappointment she experiences because of management's disregard of issues presented on the forum, Susan has not terminated her participation.

3.3. STEPHEN: THE "LIBERAL"

3.3.1. *Motivation→Strategy of Interaction→Consequence*

Stephen sees the forum as a space where arguments can be practiced and tested. His style is generally informative and impersonal, except in his confrontational interaction with Beth where he employs a declarative style and uses rationalistic devices to minimize her arguments. He sets the stage in his reaction to her comments on the thread by criticizing the quality of her arguments and evidence. His informative sociological insights are appreciated and praised by male participants (such as John and Francois). Susan does not share the appreciation and refers to Stephen's participation as difficult to grasp. One can conclude that a community is created for the informed by Stephen and those who do not follow his arguments (like Susan) or do not construct arguments in the way he condones and prefers (like Beth), are excluded.

Stephen does, in retrospect, view his participation as dissenting and describes it in the initial stage of his interaction on the forum as “trolling,” in which he identifies certain aspects of the university’s culture which he finds unacceptable and strange. His opinion is that the motive for using this technique was to raise participants’ consciousness, leading people to question the *status quo*. He views his trolling in the forum as contra-productive, leading to the intolerance of readers. He concludes that his trolling stereotyped his online identity as being disruptive and dissenting which makes him unpopular, something which he now would rather avoid:

I think in some ways it was sort of slightly more a sophisticated form of trolling, really, it was at first then I pop up and say this prayer stuff is terrible, all this religion is crap, we should get rid of it and people immediately I think see that as an extremist position and you know, that coloured the rest of my commentary, and if I can do things over again, I possibly wouldn’t be as hard about, hard core about as when I started...

3.3.2. *Online Identity→Perceptions of Others*

Contributing to the negative effect of his trolling, Stephen feels that other participants view him as unmoving, someone who does not engage personally with issues and who does not have room for opinions different from his own. In contrast, he sees himself as a reasonable person, willing to listen to other people.

Stephen sees his main opponent (Beth) as someone who does not engage with opposing arguments because she does not interact, learn or change her attitude. He views her postings as voicing a populist view without any original thought of her own, which is on the one hand useful for conducting a debate, but on the other hand demonstrates her courage - and in a way her naïvety. She presents old evolutionary ideas in her explanation of the development of races and her contributions are therefore seen as academically naïve. Her presentation of cases, which can be interpreted as racist, are criticized as unconvincing because of the lack of information she offers.

Stephen criticizes another female participant as she, like Beth, unconsciously accepts a grand racist narrative. Stephen regards race as an easy explanation for her feeling of victimization because he believes that encounters with black people and the ensuing feelings of victimization are informed by racial stereotyping.

Stephen realizes that his attitude towards Beth is patronizing and he playfully refers to his treatment of her as “hermeneutic bullying.” He is aware of the power play between John, himself and Beth. He acknowledges the advantage that powerful normative positions on human rights and academic discourse allow participants such as himself, although Stephen does not seem to care that Beth is insulted in various ways as a result of their moralistic positions.

3.3.3. *Expectations of the Forum*

Stephen’s wish was to move the consciousness of forum participants to the left. This wish concurred with his initial idealism that an online forum could bring about change. His opinion is that serious discussions on the forum could attract management’s attention and could result in structural changes. His view at the time of the interview was that popular discussions, where everyone can make a contribution, are not seen by management as serious, and that it seems as if the influence of serious discussions on a structural level is undermined by the “democratic” characteristics of the forum. Stephen

believes that any discussion therefore, however serious, is disregarded rendering the forum itself powerless.

3.3.4. *Online and Offline Moderation*

Stephen feels that censorship of forum contributions by management weakens the notion of free speech. The intervention of the institution shuts conversations on emotionally uncomfortable issues down and narrows the topics to be discussed on the forum. He also considers other discussions on the forum (such as religion, hostel culture) to have racial undertones and thinks discussions on these topics might be threatened and participants in these threads prosecuted institutionally. He therefore prefers discussion not to be censored, and preferably on uncomfortable issues. He is, however, not conscious of the negative effect of his online arguments nor of his prescriptiveness.

3.4. FRANCOIS: THE “PROVOCATEUR”

3.4.1. *Motivation*

Francois’s initial aim was to provoke debate on the forum. Religion is his first entry point of interest relative to which he starts questioning some conventions. His first arguments were directed against theologians and radical Christians:

I remember the first topic I ever tackled, and that was back in 2000 I think or 2001, was this bunch of radical Christians, uh, petitioning against the advertisement of ice creams, the seven deadly sins, the Ola ice cream, the Ola people came with this commercial slogan, eating this ice cream would be like embracing the seven deadly sins, and so a bunch of people at the faculty of theology uhm, petitioned and ultimately you know, got their way, and this to me, you know, was a provocation to common sense and what we stand for as a university, because we are a university, we’re not a church, and at the time you know, the difference was unclear, because we were still the Christian university, and so the lines were fairly blurring.

Francois holds the opinion that the radical views of the participants in the forum (such as the support for creationism and a negative view of humankind) undermine the potential universal tone of the forum. These factors make the forum unfit for reasonable debate, in his opinion. He wishes for moderate voices which he thinks can make the forum more representative of the majority.

3.4.2. *Choice of style→Perception of others→Online Identity*

Eventually Francois takes the position of *provocateur*, as he does not believe that common ground for reasoning and debate can be found. He further regards the university as a fertile field for provocation. His motive in adopting the role of *provocateur* is to mock and ridicule people, not foreseeing that this style provokes attacks and bad reactions. In retrospect, he does not see the provocations as the best way of interacting, and acknowledges that this type of discourse becomes emotionally challenging. He states that his ultimate aim was to antagonize and to be obnoxious, and finds the identity constructed around these two characteristics inevitable. He feels his forum ego was built as a result of the context he had to deal with, finding no alternative

to engaging in debates which seem archaic and “insane,” and thereby exposing himself as the *provocateur*.

Francois finds himself in a culture which is in conflict to his own, which he views as marked by critical discourse. He sees his outsider status as fortunate and does not feel bound by the morality of respect which he considers to be exercised locally. In this sense, he uses profanity and finds reactions to it entertaining.

3.4.3. *Offline and Online Moderation→Consequence*

Francois uses the forum to declare his disassociation with the culture of the university’s residents, which he believes violates students’ rights and inhibits their emancipation and learning. He uses the forum space to charge the residential manager with passively allowing a negative culture to develop, irresponsibility and undermining the development of a culture of learning. Francois was forced to make an official apology to the residential manager on the forum and had to revise his initial apology when management regarded it as a stubborn restatement of his adversarial position and not an admission of guilt. Only his second apology remained on the forum, his other “uncomfortable” posts were deleted. As his offline relationship with the rector was of a friendly nature, Francois was amicably forced into an apology which management accepted:

Yeah, the rector back then, who is Cathy, who is a close friend as well, uhm and she tried to mend the pieces, and she asked me, maybe I was the more flexible person in the whole equation I guess, but I think she also...I think she, I wouldn’t say she emotionally blackmailed me, but, you know, there wasn’t any other solution for me...

After this intervention from the university’s management, Francois is convinced that his participation from there on has been fruitless. The power of control management has, he believes, hinders conversation and deprives participants of the opportunity for argumentation. Consequently, Francois’s participation diminished. This incident had a traumatic impact on both him and his family:

You know back then it was taking a toll on my family as well, as it was the subject of conversations for a while and obviously because of the emotional affect that you derive from such a situation, so, after this episode, I saw that, well, what can you do anyway, you can use the forum as much as you want, but it is obviously controlled in many ways, and, and you can’t convince the people of your point.

In retrospect, Francois believes that his reaction to the hostel incident and the consequent action management took, was not strong enough. The position he initially took on issues did not change through his participation, and the act of participation strengthened his convictions and the directions he took over the time.

3.4.4. *Personal History→Online Identity*

Francois feels that his foreign status creates a distance between himself and the culture in which he works; he does not feel fearful about what he says on the forum. He does not care about others’ estimation of himself. He does not feel compelled by the morality of respect which he feels is exercised locally:

I rushed to my computer and logged into the forum and obviously wrote the first that you probably read, and so I wasn't of afraid of anyone because I was a foreigner I don't really care about what people think about me, because anyway I am branded as a foreigner.

4. Findings

The following proposals are formed, based on the analysis of the text and the interviews. Although only four participants' data were analysed, the proposals are based on the analysis of all the data:

4.1. THE FORUM AS AGENT OF CHANGE

When participants experience alienation from and dissatisfaction with the dominant culture on campus (based on their convictions, personal history, race, colour, language), they use the forum to express their discomfort with institutional practices.

If the expectations of the forum are focused on the forum as an instrument of social justice and agent of change, the forum acquires a moralistic and rationalistic character, the level of conflict becomes higher and participants find the forum does not meet their idealistic expectations. Such participants' style become pervasively declarative and even aggressive and is frequently experienced by readers as a verbal assault. Potential forum participants are deterred from participating, as its interactions seem disrespectful and the public exposure seems potentially harmful.

If the forum is viewed as an agent of change, then the perception is that its populist and democratic character is undermining its influence on management. The fact that everyone can participate, leads to a lack of serious discussions and the lack of seriousness leads to management generally ignoring all discourse in the forum. Even those messages that are serious and voice legitimate criticism are not acknowledged. The populist and democratic character of the forum is therefore viewed as negative. This sentiment supports the exclusive characteristic of the forum.

4.2. NORMALISTIC AND RATIONALISTIC CHARACTER

If the forum acquires a normalistic character, then participants expect the style and content of participations to meet certain formal ideal standards. Preference is given to rationalistic arguments, and relating personal experiences becomes less convincing. It also follows that the idealistic expectations of content and style lead to an intolerance of certain voices and ways of expression, and undermine the democratic potential of the forum.

If participants find that the discourse on the forum represents views they regard as disrespectful, hegemonic, non-universal and subjectivist, then they resort to rhetoric which marginalizes others' discourse. Some participants aim to oppose and ridicule those people who practice "absurd discourse" which does not allow constructive participation. These participants eventually find the forum frustrating and terminate their interactions on it.

4.3. EXTERNAL MODERATION

If participants feel especially discriminated against by the opinions and views expressed on the forum, stronger preference is given to external moderation, and management is expected to intervene. When management approves the views which echo their own, they offer support and encouragement to those expressing them and encourage them to pursue their writing on the forum. Management interferes, however, with participants whom they regard as insensitive by forcing them to acknowledge their mistakes publicly on the forum.

4.4. THE FORUM AS PLACE TO SHARE

If participants are using the forum to share an experience, their identity is not criticized and they continue their participation. The forum does not frustrate their expectations, as they do not expect it to change anything. Participants who share an experience are more sympathetically responded to by other female participants, while male participants tend to question the legitimacy of the meaning attached to the experience.

4.5. THE FORUM AS A PLACE OF GROWTH AND REFLECTION

If a participant realizes that s/he has been intolerant of opposing views, then minimal credit is given to the participation of their opponents. If a participant rethinks his/her interactions with opponents at all, the only positive reflection on the opponents' participation is that they provide an opportunity to be contradicted.

If participants view their opponents as unmoving, it can be ascribed to the fact that forum participations are read without taking the context of their opponents into account. A misjudgement of online identity then follows.

5. Conclusion

In contrast to their idealistic view and great expectations of the potential of the forum to equalize and be the rectifier of wrongs, participants who dominate the forum prove themselves to be the new oppressors, as they construct new opponents in various ways, of which moralistic condemnation forms the prevalent strategy. By labelling their online opponents as politically and socially deviant and academically inferior a new inequality is formed.

It is through sensible moderation that the forum can reach its potential as a place of growth and an agent of change. It could also invite the participation of more moderate voices, lending a balance to the forum. Certain opportunities in building an emancipatory space are discussed in the following paragraphs:

5.1. VISIBLE, IMPARTIAL AND PARTICIPATORY INTERNAL MODERATION

As the current moderator is invisible, partial and intrusive, a moral incoherence (Sokolowski, 2001) is created. The moderator should be visible, should stand as a moral judge outside the debate between participants and should assume the role of a co-

participant and not be someone whose presence is only made known by negative interventions.

5.2. NORMALISTIC AND RATIONALISTIC CHARACTER

The normalistic and rationalistic character of the discourse leads participants to assume moralistic roles and eventually to become hostile, disrespectful and alienating. Sensible moderation could rectify this by acknowledging the person behind the statement. The moderator can set an example by stating the need to know more about the person and the motive for taking a certain view of issues. In addressing participants, the moderator can also employ, as a strategy of interaction, the rhetorical devices Young (2000) proposes, such as to greet and to compliment the participants, something which is absent in an online forum. The issue often takes priority and the participant is ignored by those who build the thread. The practice of greeting and complimenting acknowledges the person behind the statement and lends a humane and a positive emotional element to the discussion. By doing this, the linguistic act does not serve to be the only representation of who the person is. Readers construct online identities and these constructs might be a misrepresentation of the real identity. Participants who are not eloquent and do not express themselves in their first language have a disadvantage and might represent themselves inadequately. Instead of creating moral incoherence by assuming the moralist position of the majority of participants, the moderator must aim to bring opposing parties to a better understanding. This intervention might also serve to build reciprocal respect among participants which is one of the tenets of the ideal speech situation of Habermas (1990).

5.3. THE FORUM AS PLACE TO SHARE AND ENGAGE

The moderator can encourage the sharing of personal experiences to clarify certain positions. Linguistic acts can obscure meaning and the telling of life stories might bring more understanding to specific situations (Young, 2000). The focus on debating might also be broadened to include sharing. If the practice of certain styles, such as trolling and ridiculing, serves the purpose not to engage in social interaction, then a moderator can facilitate moving participants beyond those styles. The moderator can acknowledge the linguistic act and move on by asking what motivates the specific choice of style.

In this specific case study, sensible interaction between participants is absent. This can be seen in the choice of declarative style in the majority of cases. The choice of ridicule, trolling and flaming also does not lead to meaningful and engaging discourse, although some of these might provide comic relief for likeminded readers. Acknowledging the humour is certainly a way to start, but the motive of the participant has to be clarified for proper understanding. Linguistic acts in the forum mostly cloud less eloquent participants' true meanings and lead to the misconstruction of online identities.

5.4. THE FORUM AS A PLACE OF GROWTH

Participants can, within an inclusive, non-competitive, friendly and accepting online community, reach more. Aristotle held the view that morality cannot exist or be

developed without a community of friends: “With friends men are more able both to think and act” (Sokolowski, 2001).

One needs friendship to grow and to realize one’s potential. The forum can offer the opportunity for people to reach something they are not able to reach themselves (such as the truth), as a friendship enables a person to attain something more (Jacquette, 2001; Sokolowski, 2001).

An acceptance of styles and divergent perceptions of situations leads to more understanding and respect. A community which supports rather than divides could also encourage more voices, and not be characterized by the declarative styles of polarized voices only.

5.5. THE FORUM AS AGENT OF CHANGE AND REFLECTION

If a moderator assumes an equal, visible co-participative rather than an unequal, invisible intervening position, emancipation is possible within the forum. The participants can become motivated to become engaged and reflect on their own positions as the moderator as co-participant sets an example of amiable engagement and reflective interaction.

The role of the invisible, detached and punitive moderator is replaced by a visible, involved co-participant who co-defines and is ultimately co-responsible for the creation of a friendly, inclusive space of mutual trust.

The ideal would be that sensible moderation of the forum would change oppressive practices within the forum and also have a democratizing effect on the institution. As participation is motivated and articulated by the thought of what the space potentially can effect, such as to be a restorer of justice and to address oppressive practices, a critical consciousness is needed not to turn these ideals into oppressive practices.

Eventually a careful moderator acknowledges that the space offered by the forum belongs to and is defined by the employees. The moderator and participants are however part of a larger context of potential undemocratic demands, such as that the forum should uphold and create the ideal image of an institution. Functioning within an institution which is defined as being educational, one should hope that space is allowed for deviant, dissentient and possibly unemancipatory views. By allowing the expression of these views in an inclusive forum, they can constructively be challenged and changed.

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