



Content analysis of computer conferencing transcripts

Roisin Donnelly & John Gardner

To cite this article: Roisin Donnelly & John Gardner (2011) Content analysis of computer conferencing transcripts, *Interactive Learning Environments*, 19:4, 303-315, DOI: [10.1080/10494820903075722](https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820903075722)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10494820903075722>



Published online: 23 Jul 2009.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 266



View related articles [↗](#)



Citing articles: 2 View citing articles [↗](#)

Content analysis of computer conferencing transcripts

Roisin Donnelly^{a*} and John Gardner^b

^a*The Learning and Teaching Centre, Dublin Institute of Technology, Dublin, Ireland;* ^b*School of Education, Queen's University, Belfast, UK*

(Received 14 February 2008; final version received 4 February 2009)

Within the field of higher education, there are situations where the learner is not well served in a classroom setting. Problematic issues such as scheduling, critical mass, time, pace and location have the potential to be counterbalanced by e-learning. Within this, the asynchronous nature of today's online learning environments and computer conferencing tools have popularly been claimed to offer tremendous benefits for learners who are willing to take responsibility for their own learning, to progress at their own pace, and interact with their online teacher to get immediate feedback on their learning and progress. Indeed, increasingly, educators today are very keen to exploit some of these new technologies for the benefit of their learners. It is argued in this article that there is a need to address the practice and research of asynchronous computer mediated conferencing. As conferencing tools become an increasingly common feature in students' experience, teachers need to have an understanding of how these tools facilitate the formation and maintenance of collaborative learning communities.

Keywords: asynchronous; collaborative learning; computer mediated conferencing; content analysis; e-learning

Introduction

The increasing use of computer mediated conferencing (CMC) in distance learning has produced an abundant record of the interactions between teachers and students. Vrasidas and McIsaac (1999: 62) have reasoned that 'One of the key components of good teaching is the intellectually stimulating exchange of ideas, those meaningful interactions that occur between teachers and students and among students themselves'. CMC provides the forum in which this exchange of ideas can take place in an online environment. Consequently, the pursuit of understanding of CMC requires some form of analysis of the interactions involved. This analysis of the written transcripts, created by students during CMC, takes the form of a systematic content analysis.

However, merely documenting conference output does not provide us with adequate information regarding our success as teachers or learners. Previously Mason and Romiszowski (1996) have identified the lack of analytical techniques applied to the context of conference transcripts as being the most glaring omission in

*Corresponding author. Email: roisin.donnelly@dit.ie

CMC research. Although transcript coding may result in statistics regarding, for example, who contributes and how often, or the level of overall activity, these numbers do not tell us much about whether a conference is thriving and successful in meeting course or module objectives. Certainly there is much to commend this type of approach by higher education tutors wishing to assess the progress of their students and improve their awareness of how students learn through computer conferencing technology. However, it is difficult to convey many kinds of social information, such as conversational tone, patterns of activity, even the size of the conversational group by simply looking at the text. Amongst others, the ebb and flow of the conversation and time sequencing, is lost in transcripts of threaded discussion. The challenge is how to reclaim that qualitative aspect of the conference. On the basis that tutors need to have a fuller understanding of the advantages and limitations of such CMC technologies, this article examines the content analysis approaches currently available.

The research of Howell-Richardson and Mellar (1996), on analysing patterns of participation amongst students within computer conferencing courses, provided an interesting snap-shot of the methodological considerations in this relatively new aspect of e-learning research. Rourke et al. (2003) enhanced the area of study with a systematic and rigorous exploration of the field covering the period 1990–2000. Their survey covered 19 commonly referenced studies and focused on the units of analysis, variables studied, reliability and research designs. They identified five main units of analysis that have generally been used in computer conferencing research, namely: proposition, sentence, paragraph, thematic, and message units.

However, it is clear from the literature that considerable debate continues to surround the different frameworks proposed for the analysis of computer conferencing transcripts. This debate generally focuses on the appropriateness of the methodology and the representation of interaction patterns and learning processes. In this article, we propose to extend the study by Rourke et al. (2003) to cover a wider range of methodological models. Specifically, we examine the merits and demerits of these models as exemplified in a selection of influential conferencing analysis studies.

Content analysis and CMC: an overview

The need for a content analysis approach to CMC postings has been commonly recognized by the literature, with Mason (1992) and Kuehn (1994) being just some of the early advocates. Content analysis can be defined as a set of research procedures that include collecting samples of representative text, devising reliable and valid rules for categorizing segments of the text and identifying and defining the target variables (Rourke et al., 1999). It is a systematic, reliable way of coding content into a theoretically meaningful set of mutually exclusive categories. As Henri (1992) has argued, content analysis provides an opportunity to reach a better understanding of learning in a CMC environment since it can help to clarify the students' cognitive processes and ways of handling information during studies. Assessing the quality of interactions and the quality of the learning experience in a CMC environment has been one of the enduring aims of this field.

Romiszowski and Mason (2004) have reported on the popular trend of regarding CMC technologies as increasingly important components of online educational environments. Being text-based, the online forum also provides a unique

opportunity to conduct learning research as it has the potential to make thinking and reasoning visible to both participants and researchers. However, the utilization of CMC in education has arguably outstripped the development of appropriate theory.

One of the earliest theoretical approaches, which now underpins much of recent content analysis techniques, was developed long before CMC came to the fore. Introduced by Bales (1950), 'interaction process analysis' it was a type of very basic content analysis. At the heart of the method was a means of classifying behaviour act by act, as it occurred in small face-to-face groups. Using series of analysis methods, the data yielded indices that were descriptive of group processes and, derivatively, of factors influencing those processes.

Interactivity has long been the focus of a wide variety of studies, and Harasim (1989) has described it as the most striking characteristic of CMC and the one factor with the greatest potential to impact learning. Jordan and Henderson (1995) have described interaction analysis as an interdisciplinary method of investigating the interaction of human beings with each other and with objects in their environment. Garfinkel (2001) observes that interaction-analytic studies see learning as a distributed, ongoing, social process, in which evidence that learning is occurring or has occurred must be found in understanding the ways in which people collaboratively do learning and recognize learning as having occurred.

However, despite a wide range of content analysis methods having been developed in the last decade, Bereiter and Scardamalia (2000) have argued that many researchers typically strive for exhaustive classification, using some predetermined scheme, and doing so simply to avoid missing out on anything. In contrast, they argue that taking the approach of asking 'what is interesting here' is superior to an exhaustive classification scheme, providing there is a sufficiently well-developed conceptual framework within which to judge what is interesting. They urge researchers to be less concerned about coding, to stand back from their data, to ask themselves questions relating to the issues of interest and then to pursue the most interesting observations until they begin to yield insights.

The literature reveals that, typically, analysis of computer conferencing proceeds at a number of different levels, including measurement of the frequency and patterns of interaction, for example, counting messages and participation rates; and categorization of messages and message content. Arguably none of these allow analysis of how collaborative learning takes place, but a combination of detailed interaction and content can significantly contribute to such analysis.

Participation analysis techniques are also useful in determining how actively and for how long participants have been engaged in a CMC session (Gunawardena, Lowe, & Anderson, 1997). There is the potential to yield information on the construction of knowledge by participants or the quality of learning that has taken place. Mason (1992) has argued that, in the past, the most common methods for assessing the content and outcomes of online forums have been limited to frequency counts, message maps showing numbers of replies and message chains, and other similar quantitative measures. One notable exception to this was Henri's (1992) work, arguably one of the most influential and sophisticated cognitive analysis models for online interaction. It examines the quality of online postings by focusing on four dimensions: social, interactive, metacognitive and cognitive. Influenced by this, researchers have been prompted to take up more challenging methods of content analysis to answer crucial questions related to social negotiation of meaning in CMC. Since, then it has been a more common practice to perform different forms

of semantic analysis to assess any meaning resulting from the online discussions. Given the centrality of the discussion forum to the online classroom of today, both researchers and practitioners have a stake in examining the characteristics and content of online discussions.

In terms of process, many content analyses of computer conferencing discussions can arguably be reduced to five basic steps. The first is to decide on the construct(s) to study and this is followed by selecting appropriate and representative samples of the type of communication that has been targeted for study. Using the conferencing software itself, the third step is to compile selections of transcripts or even entire transcripts into text files. The fourth step is to create an appropriate protocol for identifying and categorizing the target variables. Finally, it is necessary to code the transcript data by describing the target variables or by identifying relationships between variables. Using a content analysis system such as nVivo, Atlas or MAXqda2 the results can then be interpreted directly or after appropriate statistical analysis.

Key trends and influential studies in CMC analysis

The goal of online interactions has been to promote critical thinking, meaningful problem solving and knowledge construction (Marra, 2006). Jordan and Henderson (1995) have explained interaction analysis as an interdisciplinary method of investigating the interaction of human beings with each other and with objects in their environment. They observe that interaction-analytic studies see learning as a distributed, ongoing social process. Hiltz (1990) has described analysis of computer conferencing along four dimensions: characteristics inherent to the technology; social and psychological characteristics of users; characteristics of groups adopting the technology and the interaction of all of the preceding factors. More recently, Fulford and Sakaguchi (2001) have constructed five methods of analysing the content of asynchronous discourse postings: by participants, form, content, reference to participants and function of the communication.

Following Mason's (1992) critique of the usefulness of quantitative analysis of CMC discussions, one of the developments that emerged was the use of graphical presentation of the structure and content of interaction such as 'message maps'. Levin, Kim, and Riel (1990) had previously described a method that graphically displayed the interrelationships in sets of messages submitted to a conference – portraying the multi-threaded nature of conference interaction. Blake and Rapanetti (2001) also adopted a pictorial representation of the computer conference in the form of a directed graph or interaction map.

During the nineties, studies by Newman, Webb, and Cochrane (1995) and Bullen (1998), reported on observations and identification of students' engagement in the process of critical thinking. Marttunen (1997), in the context of Finnish undergraduate education, used content analysis to focus on the level of argumentation and counter-argumentation in the messages and reported positive levels of both. Jonassen and Kwon (2001) recounted positive outcomes of online participation in a comparison of face-to-face (F2F) and CMC during group problem-solving activities. In their study, there were more task-related messages in the CMC group interactions than in the F2F group and their decision-making patterns were more sophisticated than that of the F2F group. Studies by Zhu (1996) and Gunawardena et al. (1997) illustrate the social construction of knowledge by students while Resta

(1995) and Bereiter and Scardamalia (1996) have also shown how online discussions support collaborative learning.

Doubts about CMC's impact on higher order thinking skills have been raised by Garrison, Rourke, Anderson, and Archer (2000) while Anderson (2005) has argued that although he has been involved in transcript analysis, he finds it difficult to justify it in terms of current or even future impact on teaching and learning. The work is very labour intensive, has both reliability and validity challenges and, he argues, has to date had almost no impact on practice. Whilst agreeing with Anderson that current research stemming from the content analysis of CMC discussions is generally lacking in practical value and application, Jeong (2005) believes that the methods of interaction or event sequence analysis does allow us to examine how various factors affect two main areas. These are the likelihood that students will respond to certain types of messages depending on what is said, who says it, when it is said, and how it is said. Secondly, it allows the examination of the types of responses that are most likely to lead to the desired outcomes or improvements in group performance. At the same time, there is a need to focus study on online discussions within a specific task or objectives (e.g. debate or argumentation, brainstorming, problem-solving, etc.) and using event sequence analysis requires this.

The earliest cited influential studies in the field of interaction were by Bales (1950) and Flanders (1970). The former investigated small group interaction processes, with an aim to distinguish between task-oriented contributions and the 'socio-emotive' element used by tutors to maintain student motivation. The latter study sought to investigate patterns of verbal interactions between teachers and students in the face-to-face classroom. Sinclair and Coulthard (1975) reproduced this study with the same goal. All three of these early studies were descriptive in design and used units of speech for analyses.

The advent of CMC presents a number of challenges to teachers in higher education. Development and research is still needed to ascertain the full benefits of CMC, and how it can be optimized in a varied number of learning contexts. CMC promotes group interactions and is an excellent medium to encourage reflective learning, but the task of incorporating CMC into every day education remains a difficult proposition for many (Berge & Collins, 1995). Part of the difficulty in CMC research lies in identifying an appropriate unit of analysis. In a descriptive study with 80 undergraduate education students, Ahern, Peck, and Laycock (1992) used messages as the unit of analysis to examine interaction and the complexity of response between students. It was not until the late 1990s that thematic analysis began to emerge as the unit of choice for analysis of CMC and, as was mentioned above, a study by Henri (1992) proved seminal in promoting it as the way forward. Proposing five key areas for investigation, using themes for analysis, made this a comprehensive and much cited study. Participation was deconstructed into rate, timing and duration of messages; interactivity was explored for explicit and implicit interaction; social events were categorized as dialogue unrelated to problem content; cognitive effects included clarifications, making inferences, judgment and strategies; and metacognitive events were deconstructed into knowledge (person, task, strategy) and skill (evaluation, planning, regulation, self-awareness).

The mid to late 1990s witnessed a range of descriptive and quasi-experimental studies using both message and thematic units of analysis. Mower (1996), McDonald (1998) and Blanchette (1999) explored interaction, the latter conducting a descriptive and quasi-experimental study with 17 participants on a graduate degree programme.

This study scrutinized the linguistic variation in the online discussions, in particular looking at syntactic structure, cognitive functions, pedagogical features, and communicative characteristics of questions. Hillman (1999) sought to compare face-to-face and CMC interactions with students through an exploration of patterns of interaction. Critical thinking was a common area for investigation at this time, with studies by Newman et al. (1997), Marttunen (1997, 1998) and Weiss and Morrison (1998) focusing on levels of analytical thinking, argumentation and counter-argumentation, and levels of understanding and correcting misunderstandings respectively. Bullen's (1998) study with 18 students on an undergraduate computer information systems course was also designed to investigate levels of participation and critical thinking amongst students. Knowledge construction was also a popular variable for analysis and descriptive studies by Zhu (1996) and Kanuka and Anderson (1998) explored the construction of knowledge in group settings.

From 2000, interest in levels of participation, interaction and critical thinking began to emerge again in a series of descriptive studies. They were notable for choosing to adopt different units of analysis: Fahy et al. (2000), for example, used the sentence; Garrison et al. (2000) used the whole message; and Hara, Bonk, and Angeli (2000) used the paragraph. As previously noted, Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (1999) progressed the field with a concentrated exploration of social interaction amongst students in the online environment. Since 2000, however, a number of new approaches to analysing CMC discussions have also emerged, some quantitative and some qualitative. A synopsis of these is offered in Table 1, with the main criterion for inclusion being their citation by a number of other studies focusing on the design and implementation of content analysis in a variety of contexts in higher education. The table aims to enable readers to identify characteristics of the studies that most meet their needs or preferred methods.

For example, the second column shows that the studies have crossed several disciplines including business, computing, teacher education and psychology. In most cases the sample size is small to medium (max. 90). The majority of the studies (Aviv, Erlich, Ravid, & Geva, 2003; Blake & Rapanati, 2001; Craig, Gholson, Ventura, Graesser, & The Tutoring Research Group, 2000; Hammond & Wiriapinit, 2005; McKenzie & Murphy, 2000; Murphy & Ciszewska-Carr, 2005) focus on the message as the unit of analysis with Aviv et al. (2003) and Murphy and Ciszewska-Carr of particular interest in as much as they offer message categorization: physical, syntactical, referential, propositional and thematic in the former, and semantic and syntactic in the latter. Curtis and Lawson (2001), Ham and Davey (2005), LePage and Robinson (2005) and Pena-Shaff, Altman, & Stephenson (2005) focus on thematic approaches. For those willing to try more macro approaches, the study by Gilbert and Dabbagh (2005) focuses on single and cross-course units of analysis while Riley (2006) uses numerical frequency of participation and types of talk.

Perhaps more pertinent for prospective and existing researchers is the fourth column, covering the variables studied. The variety is predictably more pronounced than the units of analysis might suggest. For example, the studies carried out by Hammond and Wiriapinit (2005), LePage and Robinson (2005), and McKenzie and Murphy (2000) concentrate on participation, while Craig et al. (2000), Curtis and Lawson (2001) and Riley (2006) focus on aspects of reasoning and collaborative working. Knowledge construction is the main aspect of the studies by Aviv et al.

Table 1. Recent influential CMC content analysis studies.

Study	Context of study	Unit of analysis	Variables studied	Research design
Aviv, Erlich, Ravid, and Geva (2003)	10 students on a BA in computer science programme	Message – five categories: physical, syntactical, referential, propositional, thematic Message	Knowledge construction	Evaluative
Blake and Rapanetti (2001)	12 students on an open university computing course	Message	Patterns and frequencies of interactions	Evaluative
Craig, Gholson, Ventura and Graesser (2000)	48 students drawn from an introductory psychology course	Message	Deep level reasoning	Descriptive
Curtis and Lawson (2001)	24 students in adult- and further education courses	Thematic	Collaborative learning behaviours	Evaluative
Gilbert and Dabbagh (2005)	87 participants on a graduate instructional technology course	Single course and cross course	Meaningful discourse	Multiple case study
Ham and Davey (2005)	24 students on a postgraduate teaching diploma	Thematic	Student–student interaction	Action research
Hammond and Wiriyapinit (2005)	43 students on an MBA program	Message	Participation/Pattern of communication	Descriptive
LePage and Robinson (2005)	90 students in three cohorts on a teacher education masters program	Thematic	Participation and community	Descriptive
McKenzie and Murphy (2000)	Graduate certificate in higher education	Message	Participation	Evaluative
Murphy and Ciszewska-Carr (2005)	10 participants on an online learning module	Message: Semantic and Syntactic	Problem formation in a group	Descriptive
Pena-Shaff, Altman and Stephenson (2005)	35 undergraduate and graduate students on CMC course	Thematic	Knowledge construction	Case study
Riley (2006)	Young students studying global citizenship	Numerical frequencies of participation and talk type	Social reasoning	Evaluative

(2003) and Pena-Shaff, Altman, and Stephenson (2005) while Blake & Rapanati (2001), Gilbert and Dabbagh (2005) and Ham and Davey (2005) address interaction and dialogue. The fifth column demonstrates the range of methodologies on offer among the studies, including case study, action research and basic description. The various attributes of the studies above, and a selection of 19 studies covered by the Rourke et al. (2003) review, will be developed further in the next sections.

The contents of Table 1 evidence that a wide range of models and frameworks for classifying the output of discussion forums have been discussed in the literature. Wilson and Whitelock (1998), for example, had proposed a model that analyses a range of student interactions in an asynchronous online discussion environment and ascribes each to knowledge, motivation, or social dimensions. The seminal framework, developed by Henri (1992) and mentioned earlier, proposed four dimensions of analysis: social, interactive, metacognitive, and cognitive. There has been criticism of this model suggesting that the 'limitation of Henri's method of analysis is that it was designed for contexts where there was a strong teacher presence, and is not readily applicable to learner-centred conferencing environments' (McLoughlin & Luca, 2000: 222). However, it is debatable whether this model lessens the role and influence of the tutor.

All the studies outlined in Table 1 have faced methodological challenges in creating and applying valid indicators that reflect the quality and extent of deep and meaningful approaches to learning facilitated in a computer conferencing environment. The challenge for all is to choose indicators that are specific enough to be meaningful, but still broad enough to be usable in the actual analysis of transcripts. The work of Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson (1997) is useful in its social constructivist approach that is an elaboration of Henri's work. Their model describes 'five phases moving from knowledge sharing to knowledge building' (414), which can usefully lead to establishing frameworks around communal and cognitive uses of the discussion forum. Garrison et al. (2000) have also argued that a further important issue for consideration is that these indicators must be parsimoniously categorized within the main elements of a community of inquiry or group learning situation so that coherence and meaning are clear.

Units of analysis: which one should I use?

There are different ways of categorizing units of analysis but the classification by Aviv et al. (2003) is useful: physical units (messages), syntactical units (words or statements), referential units (messages sent by a particular person), propositional units (identified by having a predefined structure), and thematic units (identified by definitions of various contents). A common type of unit of analysis in an online discussion transcript is the syntactic unit or fixed unit which includes a sentence, paragraph or whole message. These are delineated by graphic conventions such as indentation of a new paragraph, a period at the end of a sentence or a heading preceding a message (Howell-Richardson & Mellar, 1996). Researchers have used all three types of syntactic units and have identified their value in particular contexts. Specifically this is that they are 'instantly recognizable' in a text (Rourke et al., 2001: 12) and within transcripts they are both obvious and constant (Fahy, 2001). Hillman (1996) and Fahy et al. (2000) have also used the sentence as a unit of analysis. The paragraph is a larger grained unit of analysis and this has been used in studies by Hara, Bonk and Angeli (1998) and Rourke et al. (2001)). Others including Marcelo,

Torres, and Perera (2002), Khine and Lourdasamy (2003), Aviv et al. (2003) and Rourke et al. (1999) have used the whole message as a unit of analysis. Clearly, it is the case that of all syntactic units, the boundaries of a message are very clearly defined in any context of computer conferencing. Arguably, this characteristic makes it a reliable tool with which to conduct coding. The objective and unambiguous identification of the syntactic unit in a transcript highlights its reliability for conducting analysis with multiple coders, but it also has several limitations. The first of these is related to identifiability, which is the challenge to a coder of choosing different types of syntactic units. There is a second, very practical, limitation of the syntactic unit, and this relates to its feasibility. The choice of syntactic unit may place impractical demands on coders and the coding process. An example of this is the use of a sentence proving problematic with long and multiple transcripts. Clearly in studies which have a large number of cases to analyse, using the syntactic unit could place a burden on resources.

There is growing use of the thematic unit in content analysis of online discussions, made popular by Henri (1992). Aviv et al. (2003) suggest that thematic units are the most preferable since they are related to the context in which the analysis will be performed. However it is worth bearing in mind the constraints with this unit associated by a number of researchers. The thematic unit has been described as 'ill defined' (Howell-Richardson & Mellor, 1996: 51), leading to inconsistency in identifying the unit. Fahy et al. (2000) have noted the difficulties of identifying units of meaning within discussion transcripts as they are 'not discrete or identifiable on the basis of consistent criteria' (86). The lack of specific criteria for identifying semantic units has a direct impact on reliability, or more specifically, reproducibility in content analysis studies where a unit of meaning has been chosen for analysis. Murphy and Ciszewska-Carr (2005) contrasted results obtained using semantic and syntactic units of analysis in the context of online asynchronous discussions. They recommend that ultimately the choice of unit needs to take into consideration the implications for the particular context of the discussion, and also issues of reliability, feasibility and identifiability in relation to the choice of unit.

Overall the studies reviewed by Rourke et al. (2003) and those introduced here, suggest that most existing research has used message analysis, often citing it as a unique method for those researching asynchronous online discussion. However, there is also a tendency to be over-reliant on a single, or dominant, method of data collection.

Conclusion

It has been argued in the literature that analysis of CMC transcripts provides a powerful means for understanding eLearning. Various researchers have developed models and tools to facilitate its analysis. Clearly, there are limitations in using quantitative message analysis alone in that, while it gives a broad overview of group activity in an asynchronous online discussion, it gives no direct insight into the experience of the learners, or their perspective on the nature of the discussions that have taken place. Quantitative overviews should therefore be complemented by content analyses whose value lies in describing the nature and scope of discussion forums.

One lesson from the studies examined in this paper, and arguably holding no surprises for anyone who is familiar with this type of research, is that over-reliance

on a single or dominant method of data collection should be avoided if a comprehensive understanding of what is going on is to be achieved. It is important to use a variety of data sources and analysis techniques to meet research objectives. Although transcript or content analysis has its limitations, interesting insights can emerge when combined with focus group interviews and observations. This is particularly the case when one looks closely at the types of learning happening and the types of interactions that participants have. As its essence, content analysis provides a set of data against which learner perceptions may be compared and contrasted. Findings from such different methods of data collection can be examined in respect to consistency or contrast, where a match between findings is sought or where contradictory findings emerge. The potential for a third category, complementarity, is also strengthened by multiple data sources and methods, as findings derived from one method may add a perspective unavailable, or simply not apparent, from the findings that arise from another method.

In exploring the studies available in this paper, it has been seen that research in computer-mediated communication is rich with possibilities. Researching the effects of computer-mediated communication on learning is increasingly popular as this medium allows for rapid communication among students as well as between the student and the teacher. Although computer-mediated communication has been available for educators for several decades, early research focussed primarily on the effects of technical features or on the effects of computer-mediated communication on social interactions in mainly business settings; exploration of different facilitation techniques is much less developed. It is hoped that this paper has presented some food for thought in contributing to the field.

Notes on contributors

Roisin Donnelly is a lecturer in the Learning, Teaching, and Technology Centre at the Dublin Institute of Technology. Her main research areas include e-Learning and problem-based learning, supporting virtual communities and active learning strategies. Her recent co-edited book is *Applied eLearning and eTeaching in Higher Education*: <http://www.igi-global.com/reference/details.asp?id=7958> and she has over 50 peer-reviewed publications. She is a fellow of the UK's Higher Education Academy and a member of Ireland's Educational Developer's Network.

John Gardner is a professor of education in the School of Education at Queen's University, Belfast. His main research areas include policy and practice in education, particularly in relation to assessment and information and communications technologies. His recent work includes a book: *e-Learning: Concepts and Practice* (with Bryn Holmes, Sage, 2006) and a project on the use of virtual repositories for research resources in Education. He has over 100 peer-reviewed publications and has managed research projects exceeding £2.3 million in total since 1990. He is President Elect of the British Educational Research Association, a fellow of the British Computer Society and a member of the UK Council of the Academy of Social Sciences.

References

- Ahern, T., Peck, K., & Laycock, M. (1992). The effects of teacher discourse in computer-mediated discussion. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 8(3), 291–309.
- Anderson, T. (2005). *Units of analysis, transcript analysis discussion*. Retrieved April 2008, from <http://cider.athabascau.ca/CIDERSIGs/TranscriptAnalysisSIG>
- Aviv, R., Erlich, Z., Ravid, G., & Geva, A. (2003). Network analysis of knowledge construction in asynchronous learning networks. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 7(3), 1–23.

- Bales, R. (1950). A set of categories for the analysis of small group interaction. *American Sociological Review*, 15, 257–263.
- Bereiter, C., & Scardamalia, M. (2000). Learning to work creatively with knowledge. In E. De Corte, L. Verschaffel, N. Entwistle, & J. van Merriënboer (Eds.), *Powerful learning environments: Unraveling basic components and dimensions* (pp. 55–68). (Advances in Learning and Instruction Series). Oxford, UK: Elsevier Science.
- Berge, Z.L. & Collins, M.P. (Eds.). (1995). *Computer-mediated communication and the online classroom* (Vols. 1–3). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Blake, C., & Rapanotti, L. (2001). Mapping interactions in a computer conferencing environment. In P. Dillenbourg, A. Eurelings, & K. Hakkarinen (Eds.), *Proceedings of the European Perspectives on Computer Supported Collaborative Learning Conference, Euro-CSCCL 2001*. University of Maastricht. Retrieved March 10, 2007, from <http://mcs.open.ac.uk/lr38/Formal/Publications/euro-cscl2001.pdf>
- Blanchette, J. (1999). Register choice: Linguistic variation in an online classroom. *International Journal of Educational Telecommunications*, 5(2), 127–142.
- Bullen, M. (1998). Participation and critical thinking in online university distance education. *Journal of Distance Education*, 13(2), 1–32.
- Craig, S., Gholson, B., Ventura, M., Graesser, A., & The Tutoring Research Group. (2000). Overhearing dialogues and monologues in virtual tutoring sessions: Effects on questioning and vicarious learning. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education*, 11, 242–253.
- Curtis, D., & Lawson, M. (2001). Exploring collaborative online learning. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 5(1), 21–34.
- Fahy, P. (2001). Addressing some common problems in transcript analysis. *IRRODL Research Notes*, 1(2). Retrieved March 10, 2007, from <http://www.irrodl.org/content/v1.2/research.html#Fahy>
- Fahy, P., Crawford, G., Ally, M., Cookson, P., Keller, V., & Prosser, F. (2000). The development and testing of a tool for analysis of computer mediated conferencing transcripts. *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, 46(1), 85–88.
- Flanders, N. (1970). *Analysing teacher behaviour*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.
- Fulford, C., & Sakaguchi, G. (2001). Developing a taxonomy of interaction strategies for two-way interactive distance education television. *International Journal of Instructional Media*, 28(4), 375–396.
- Garfinkel, H., & Rawls, A. ed. (2001). *Ethnomethodology's programme: Working out Durkheim's aphorism*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Garrison, R., Rourke, L., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). A review of methodological issues in analyzing computer conferencing transcripts. *International Journal of Artificial Intelligence in Education*, 12(1), 8–22.
- Gilbert, P.K., & Dabbagh, N. (2005). How to structure online discussions for meaningful discourse: A case study. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 36(1), 5–18.
- Gunawardena, C., Lowe, C., & Anderson, T. (1997). Analysis of a global online debate and the development of an interaction analysis model for examining social construction of knowledge in computer conferencing. *Journal Educational Computing Research*, 17(4), 397–431.
- Ham, V., & Davey, R. (2005). Our first time: Two higher education tutors reflect on becoming a 'virtual teacher'. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 42(3), 257–264.
- Hammond, M., & Wiriyapinit, M. (2005). Learning through online discussion: A case of triangulation in research. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 21(3), 283–302.
- Hara, N., Bonk, C., & Angeli, C. (1998). Content analysis of online discussion in an applied psychology course. *Instructional Science*, 28(2), 115–152.
- Harasim, L. (1989). Online education: A new domain. In R. Mason & A. Kaye (Eds.), *Mindweave: Communication, computers and distance education* (pp. 50–62). Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Henri, F. (1992). Computer conferencing and content analysis. In A.R. Kaye (Ed.), *Collaborative learning through computer conferencing* (pp. 117–136). Berlin: Springer Verlag.
- Hillman, D. (1996). *Improved coding and data management for discourse analysis: A case study in face-to-face and computer-mediated classroom interaction*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge, Cambridge, UK. Retrieved March 10, 2007, from <http://www.quahog.org/thesis/>

- Hiltz, S. (1990). Evaluating the virtual classroom. In L. Harasim (Ed.), *Online education: Perspectives on a new environment* (pp. 133–169). New York: Praeger.
- Howell-Richardson, C., & Mellar, H. (1996). A methodology for the analysis of patterns of participation within computer mediated communication courses. *Instructional Science*, 24, 47–69.
- Jeong, A. (2005). *The effects of supportive styles of communication on group interaction patterns and argumentation in online discussions, transcript analysis discussion*. Retrieved April 2008, from, <http://cider.athabascau.ca/CIDERSIGs/TranscriptAnalysisSIG>
- Jonassen, D., & Kwon, H. (2001). Communication patterns in computer mediated versus face-to-face group problem solving. *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 49(1), 35–51.
- Jordan, B., & Henderson, A. (1995). Interaction analysis: Foundations and practice. *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 4(1), 39–103.
- Kanuka, H., & Anderson, T. (1998). Online social interchange, discord, and knowledge construction. *Journal of Distance Education*, 13(1), 57–75.
- Khine, M.S., & Lourdasamy, A. (2003). Using conversant media as a collaborative learning tool in teacher education. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 19(2), 260–274.
- Kuehn, S. (1994). Computer-mediated communication in instructional settings: A research agenda. *Communication Education*, 43, 171–183.
- LePage, P., & Robinson, P. (2005). Computer conferencing and the development of habits of mind associated with effective teacher education. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 16(4), 369–393.
- Levin, J., Kim, H., & Riel, M. (1990). Analysing instructional interactions on electronic message networks. In L. Harasim (Ed.), *Online education: Perspectives on a new environment* (pp. 185–214). New York: Praeger Publishers.
- Marcelo, C., Torres, J., & Perera, V. (2002). *Analysing the asynchronous online communication: The development of a qualitative instrument*. Paper presented at the European Distance Education Network Meeting in Granada, June 2002. Retrieved March 10, 2007, from <http://prometeo.us.es/idea/mie/pub/marcelo/eden2002.pdf>
- Marra, R. (2006). A review of research methods for assessing content of computer-mediated discussion forums. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 17(3), 243–267.
- Marttunen, M. (1997). Electronic mail as a pedagogical delivery system: An analysis of the learning of argumentation. *Research in Higher Education*, 38(3), 345–363.
- Marttunen, M. (1998). Electronic mail as a forum for argumentative interaction in higher education studies. *Journal of Educational Computing Research*, 18, 387–405.
- Mason, R. (1992). Evaluation methodologies for computer conferencing applications. In A.R. Kaye (Ed.), *Collaborative learning through computer conferencing* (pp. 105–116). Berlin: Springer-Verlag.
- Mason, R., & Romiszowski, A. (1996). Computer-mediated communication. In D. Jonassen (Ed.), *Handbook of research for educational communications and technology* (pp. 438–456). New York: Macmillan.
- McDonald, J. (1998). *Interpersonal group dynamics and development in computer conferencing: The rest of the story*. Proceedings of the 14th Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning. Madison, WI: Continuing and Vocational Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison.
- McKenzie, W., & Murphy, D. (2000). “I hope this goes somewhere”: Evaluation of an online discussion group. *Australian Journal of Educational Technology*, 16(3), 239–257. Retrieved March 10, 2007, from <http://www.ascilate.org.au/ajet/ajet16/mckenzie.html>
- McLoughlin, C., & Luca, J. (2000). Cognitive engagement and higher order thinking through computer conferencing: We know why but do we know how? In A. Herrmann & M.M. Kulski (Eds.), *Flexible Futures in Tertiary Teaching, Teaching and Learning Forum* (pp. 219–234). Perth: Curtin University of Technology.
- Mower, D. (1996). A content analysis of student/instructor communication via computer conferencing. *Higher Education*, 32, 217–241.
- Murphy, E., & Ciszewska-Carr, J. (2005). Contrasting syntactic and semantic units in the analysis of online discussions. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 21(4), 546–566.

- Newman, D., Webb, B., & Cochrane, C. (1995). A content analysis method to measure critical thinking in face-to-face and computer supported group learning. *Interpersonal Computing and Technology Journal*, 3(5), 56–77. Retrieved March 10, 2007, from <http://www.qub.ac.uk/mgt/papers/methods/contpap.html>
- Pena-Shaff, J., Altman, W., & Stephenson, H. (2005). Asynchronous online discussions as a tool for learning: Students' attitudes, expectations, and perceptions. *Journal of Interactive Learning Research*, 16(4), 409–430.
- Resta, P. (1995). *Project CIRCLE: Student mentors as a strategy for training and supporting teachers in the use of computer-based tools for collaborative learning*. Austin: Learning Technology Center, College of Education, The University of Texas at Austin. Retrieved March 10, 2007, from <http://www.csc195.Indiana.edu/csc195/resta.html>
- Riley, N. (2006). Methods for evaluating critical learning using online discussion forums. *Technology, Pedagogy and Education*, 15(1), 63–78.
- Romiszowski, A., & Mason, R. (2004). Computer-mediated Communication. In D.H. Jonassen (Ed.), *Handbook for research in educational communications and technology* (2nd ed.). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Rourke, L., Anderson, T., Garrison, D.R., & Archer, W. (1999). Assessing social presence in asynchronous text-based computer conferencing. *Journal of Distance Education*, 14(2), 50–71.
- Rourke, L., Anderson, T., Garrison, D.R., & Archer, W. (2003). Methodological issues in the content analysis of computer conference transcripts. In D.R. Garrison & T. Anderson (Eds.), *E-learning in the 21st century* (pp. 129–152). London: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Sinclair, J., & Coulthard, M. (1975). *Towards an analysis of discourse*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Vrasidas, C., & McIsaac, S.M. (1999). Factors influencing interaction in an online course. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 13(3), 22–36.
- Weiss, R., & Morrison, G. (1998). *Evaluation of a graduate seminar conducted by listserv*. ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 423 868.
- Wilson, T., & Whitelock, D. (1998). What are the perceived benefits of participating in a computer-mediated communication (CMC) environment for distance learning computer science students? *Computers and Education*, 30(3–4), 259–269.
- Zhu, E. (1996). *Meaning negotiation, knowledge construction, and mentoring in a distance learning course*. In M.R. Simonson, M. Hays, & S. Hall (Eds.), *18th Annual Proceedings of Selected Research and Development Presentations* (pp. 821–844). Washington, DC: Association for Educational Communications and Technology.