

Towards reconstructing meaning
when text is communicated electronically

by

Patricia Margaret Alexander

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ABSTRACT

CANDIDATE: Patricia Margaret Alexander

PROMOTER: Prof. J. D. Roode

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KEYWORDS: Dispersed collaborative teams, Internet-based learning, Theory of Communicative Action, Radicalised modernity, trust, information, space and time, computer-mediated communication

Modern society frequently fails to achieve the goal of improved rationality and this is largely because the conditions for ideal speech do not prevail. We do not always permit everyone an equal opportunity to explain their point of view and the force of the best argument does not always prevail. Communication becomes more difficult when people cannot meet face to face, but it is also hindered when people cannot contact one another easily. There is, therefore, a trade-off between using computer-mediated media for communication and speaking to each other in person. Although meaning can never be shared to the extent that two individuals have precisely the same interpretation of a concept, and society is not based on individuals uniformly embracing identical views or values, in every day life consensus needs to be reached and truth claims, normative validity claims and aesthetic validity claims must be made, debated and eventually accepted or refuted

Collaboration on substantial tasks that require the development of concepts and reconstruction of meaning depends on effective communication. In the distributed social structures which have developed as a result of globalisation it is important that dispersed teams are able to work together. This includes collaborative learning in distance education.

In the action research undertaken first year Informatics students could choose between doing team work face-to-face, or as dispersed teams communicating via e-mail or WebCT. The discussions were recorded and were analysed to identify the different types of communicative

action engaged in. This was done to understand how this group collaborate so that success factors could be identified and proposals be made regarding education in the use of e-mail. It was found that the virtual (dispersed) teams studied did not succeed in collaborating.

Communication ability is defined in this thesis as the skill that compensates for the inherent leanness of the medium used. A number of depictions of factors contributing to successful asynchronous collaboration are provided. Different classes of information and time, trust and communication ability assist in constructing meaning when text is communicated electronically. This led to suggestions regarding improving the communications ability of individuals.

I declare that

**Towards reconstructing meaning
when text is communicated electronically**

is my own work and that all sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references

P M Alexander

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