

The Decentered Teacher and the Construction of Social Space in the Virtual Classroom

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The relative newness of online education to most teachers and students means that the virtual classroom is largely uncharted social space; teachers and students must deliberately consider how and when they will enter into the virtual classroom and where and how they will locate themselves and each other within it. This study uses the concepts of “time-space separation” and “disembedding,” drawn from Giddens’s work on globalization, to identify how teachers and students in one virtual classroom constructed social relations in synchronous and asynchronous Web-based forums. Using discourse-analytic methods, the study illuminates the discursive processes through which the teacher and students rearticulated conventional classroom discourse to create hybrid, student-controlled/teacher-centered spaces. The authors identify the challenges and potentials of such classrooms for teachers and raise several questions for further investigation into, and theorizing about, teaching and teachers’ work in the virtual classroom.

The emergence of the virtual university classroom and online educational forums has been heralded both as opening possibilities for new, more powerful learning experiences and as inhibiting the creation of communities of practice in which learning is situated. Whether one sees the glass of the virtual classroom as half full or half empty, the relative newness of online education to most teachers and students means that the virtual classroom is largely uncharted space. When teachers and students enter the face-to-face university classroom, they hold commonly shared expectations about how the social relations through which teaching and learning occur are constituted within it. Teachers and students do not so much expect to define social space and interaction within face-to-face classrooms as they expect to find their place within it. By contrast, in the current era when online classes are new and unspecified, teachers and students may share few, if any, expectations and conventions. Instead, teachers and students must

deliberately consider how and when they will enter into the virtual classroom and where and how they will locate themselves and each other within it. Questions of how these acts of entering and positioning shape the social space and interactions through which teaching and learning occur are thus critical to understanding the implications the virtual classroom holds for teachers and teaching.

A growing body of literature on distance learning, perhaps the closest kin to online learning, has imported the concepts of social presence and teaching presence from communications and social psychology to address these questions (Wallace, 2003). This literature investigates how teachers and students make themselves known in distance classrooms and, most recently, online classrooms. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976, p. 65) have defined social presence as “the degree of salience of another person in an interaction and the consequent salience of an interpersonal relationship.” Studies of social presence detail how teachers and students use personal language, first names, and emoticons, reveal personal information, and show interest in other people’s lives to create social presence in online environments (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Lombard & Ditton, 1997; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999; Short et al., 1976). Students report being both more satisfied and learning more from online classes in which both the teacher and the students make themselves socially present, though social presence has not been found to predict substantive engagement with ideas or the development of meaningful discourse (Benbunan-Fich & Hiltz, 1999).

In these studies on distance learning, the focus is on individual participation. Little attention is given to how the actions of the participants form the classroom environment and what characteristics that environment takes on as a result of teacher and student actions. Further, little attention is given to specifying the structure of the online classroom environment itself and how it shapes teacher and student interactions. The environment is treated as background onto which teachers and students make their presence more or less known.

The emphasis on social presence in current online literature, perhaps paradoxically, implies that absence is a key structuring element of the virtual classroom. Not only does the virtual classroom lack the shared expectations and social conventions associated with the face-to-face classroom, it also lacks markers that root it in any particular place. Unlike face-to-face classrooms, virtual classrooms are radically disassociated from the locales in which teachers and students live their everyday lives. Identifying the textual devices teachers and students use to construct social presence in online classrooms is a step towards understanding how teachers and students respond to the delocalized classroom space. It stops short, however, of exploring how this delocalization shapes and is shaped by these responses.

We present a case study of an online class taught by the first author in Spring 2001 as a way to begin to specify the contours of the virtual classroom and the dialectic between these contours and the actions teachers and students take to organize social interaction within them. As in other research on virtual classrooms, we use discourse-analytic methods to examine how teachers and students interact through printed text. Unlike this research, however, we place our analysis in the broader sociological literature on globalization. The virtual classroom both reflects and constitutes the processes of globalization that have made it possible for people to extend their social relations across time and space. Teachers and students can access the virtual classroom almost instantaneously from almost anywhere in the world. As they participate in the virtual classroom, teachers and students take part in and are shaped by the processes of globalization.

We draw, in particular, on Giddens's (1991) concepts of time-space separation and disembedding to identify the social forces that give shape to the virtual classroom. We also use Fairclough's (1992) ideas of the democratization of discourse and synthetic personalization to specify how these concepts are embodied in and constituted by the discursive practices teachers and students use to construct social space within the virtual classroom. Drawing on these concepts, our analyses of the discursive practices teachers and students employ in one virtual classroom illustrate how such classrooms are open to being constructed as hybrid social spaces marked by both traditional teacher/student relations and the attenuation and subversion of these relations. Our study contributes to deepening the understanding of online teaching by identifying the possibilities and challenges that the inherent disembeddedness of the virtual environment poses for the online teacher.

THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM AND THE DIALECTICS OF GLOBALIZATION

According to Giddens (1991), globalization is centrally characterized by three processes that structure social relations: the separation of time and space, disembedding, and reflexivity. The first refers to the conditions in which the calculation of time and the ordering of space are severed from the particular locales, or places, that people inhabit (Giddens, 1990). This severing of time and space from place allows for new ways of organizing both and gives rise to the creation of generalized spaces in which people can participate in standardized social practices regardless of their physical location (Durr Schmidt, 1997). Fast-food restaurants, such as McDonald's, are prototypical generalized spaces. Anyone can get the same product,

made in the same way, in these restaurants regardless of the country and locale in which the restaurants are located.

The separation of time and space makes possible disembedding, or the “lifting out of social relations from local contexts and their rearticulation across indefinite tracts of time and space” (Giddens, 1991, p. 18). Giddens identifies two primary disembedding mechanisms: symbolic tokens and expert systems. The former are media of exchange, such as money or, in education, Carnegie units and diplomas, that have standard value and can be exchanged by people in a plurality of contexts. Expert systems like medicine, law, and education are organized around specialized knowledge that has validity beyond the practitioners or clients who use it. Giddens argues that globalization facilitates the penetration of expert systems into all areas of social lives. Advances in scientific, medical, and communication technologies make it possible for expert systems to govern and regulate the production, distribution, and consumption of basic goods such as food, clothing, housing, health, and education, as well as aesthetics, art, and recreation. For example, technical and safety standards regulate the production and distribution of food, the building of homes, and the medicines we take. Increasingly even social relations are regulated by expert systems as the doctor, counselor, and therapist become central to people’s well-being.

The expansion of expert systems makes more social spaces and interactions safer as it imposes routine and predictability. At the same time, because expert systems continually create and re-create knowledge and information, their expansion gives rise to institutional reflexivity, which Giddens defines as “the susceptibility of most aspects of social activity and material relations with nature to chronic revision in the light of new information and new knowledge” (1991, p. 20). One outcome of this reflexivity is that the hold of preestablished precepts and practices on social life becomes increasingly attenuated. As people disengage from traditional, place-based relations and as expert systems increasingly mediate our social relations, people’s intimate relations become open to public questioning.

Giddens’s work offers useful concepts with which to specify the contours of the virtual classroom. The virtual classroom is both a product of and constitutive of the central processes of globalization. Teachers and students, located in different time zones and separated by vast amounts of space, can interact beyond the boundaries of their physical locales via the printed text and the electronic signal. The disembedding of classroom interaction from locales opens the possibilities for the creation of generalized spaces in which interactions become increasingly standardized and for the creation of new spaces distinguished by the absence of preestablished conventions and structures and the construction of new types of social interactions. Teachers and students can import conventional classroom practices, such as lectures and recitations, into the virtual classroom. At the same time, because virtual

classrooms are characterized by the absence of personalized, face-to-face interactions, teachers and students are not bound by these conventions. The separation of time and space creates latitude for social action and reaction that may violate the conventions of face-to-face classrooms. For example, in the online classroom, students can easily choose not to respond to teacher questions and postings. Online teachers have few tools to demand a response. They may communicate electronically, but students can still elect not to reply. In contrast, in the face-to-face classroom, basic conversational norms make it difficult for students not to respond to teacher questions in some way, whether in words or in gestures, and teachers have a range of tools available to them to demand student responses, including physical maneuvering, verbal demands, and, ultimately, banishing students from the physical classroom. In short, like other arenas of social interaction opened by the forces of globalization, the virtual classroom makes possible new combinations and recombinations of old and new social conventions and categories.

Like Giddens, Fairclough (1992) is concerned with the changes in social relations brought about by globalization. He explores these changes as they occur in institutional discourse and personal interaction. Fairclough identifies two related types of discourse changes central to globalization: the democratization of discourse and synthetic personalization. The former refers to “the removal of inequalities and asymmetries in the discursive and linguistic rights, obligations and prestige of groups of people” (p. 201). Among the five areas of discursive democratization that Fairclough reviews, the most relevant to the study of social interaction in virtual classrooms is the elimination of overt power markers in institutional discourse types, such as classroom discourse, structured by unequal power relations. Among the types of power markers that tend to be eliminated in democratized discourse are asymmetrical terms of address; asymmetries in control features, such as initiating topics, summarizing, and asking questions; and the use of specialized vocabulary by more powerful participants. Though Fairclough argues that institutional discourse is becoming increasingly democratized, this movement has the potential both to alter power relations and to reinforce existing inequalities in increasingly subtle and difficult to challenge ways. As those in power give up the use of power markers, they can obscure real differences in the access to and power over the distribution of social resources. In this way, the democratization of discourse can disguise and reinscribe existing inequalities at the same time as it challenges them.

Fairclough argues that the reduction or elimination of power markers relates to the tendency towards informality in democratized discourse. This tendency is manifested in the projection of conversational discourse, typically associated with the private domain, into the public sphere and relates to the rise of “synthetic personalization.” Synthetic personalization

refers to the simulation of private, face-to-face discourse in public, mass-audience (print, radio, and television) and institutional (medical, market, state, and educational) discourse and reflects the shift of the private spheres, or lifeworlds, into the public domain as it enables institutions to colonize the former. In this process, domestic arrangements and relationships are made public and open to calculative intervention and use by institutions. Synthetic personalization closely parallels Giddens's concept of reflexivity. Both highlight the increasing permeability of private/public boundaries and the expansion of institutional control, or expert systems, over and into our most intimate social relations.

The ideas of democratization of discourse and synthetic personalization can expand and enrich the idea of social presence. Studies on social presence in the virtual classroom cited above detail how people create a persona for others to "know" by revealing personal characteristics, expressing emotions, and relating to others even when they are not asked or expected to do so. Fairclough's ideas allow us to extend social presence beyond an individual phenomenon and to explore it as a manifestation of broader changes in our social relations occurring through globalization.

Giddens and Fairclough both highlight the processes through which the disarticulation and rearticulation of established precepts and practices contain the possibilities for reinforcing, attenuating, and altering existing social relations and the inequalities they embed. As such, they raise questions about whether and how the virtual classroom makes possible the recombining of conventional and new social relations between teachers and students. How do teachers and students' interactions shape and get shaped by the disembedded nature of the virtual classroom space? Do teachers and students' interactions in this new, generalized space manifest the tendency towards democratizing discourse and the shifting of the lifeworld domains and discourse into the public sphere? If so, what are the implications of this for the organization of social space and interactions and for teachers and teaching in the virtual classroom?

THE STUDY

The questions above frame our case study of an online course taught by the first author with assistance from the second. Our study is not, however, a self-study of our teaching practices. We did not analyze classroom data until after the class ended, and while we did make note of interesting interaction patterns that emerged as we were teaching, our goal was not to identify particular patterns of teacher decision making to derive specific implications for practice. Rather, we hope that the theoretical and analytical tools we have used to understand how our students and we constructed and

negotiated interactions will contribute to richer theorizing about the challenges and possibilities inherent in online teaching.

THE COURSE

During the summer of 2000, Steve Koziol and a group of graduate students, including Basmadjian, in the Department of Teacher Education at Michigan State University designed the online course "Teaching Literature through Discussion in the Middle Grades." Anagnostopoulos was the first to teach the course, in the spring of 2001. Basmadjian was her teaching assistant. The course was intended for middle school English language arts teachers and focused on improving their knowledge and abilities to plan for and facilitate open discussions. Ten students enrolled in the course. Eight of the students lived in Michigan, one student lived in California, and another student lived in the Netherlands. Six of the students were part of the same cohort in the college's master's in technology program. These students were enrolled in the final, face-to-face course of their master's degree concurrent with their enrollment in the online course taught by Anagnostopoulos and Basmadjian.

The course itself was a Web-based, virtual university course that consisted of four sequentially organized sections that involved students in responding, through typed texts, to readings, videotaped segments of a discussion class in which teachers demonstrated discussion strategies described in the course readings, and videotapes students made of their own efforts to lead discussions in their classrooms. Given technical limitations, students did not share their own videotapes with each other. They did send Anagnostopoulos, for their final course project, a videotape of one classroom discussion that they led and analyzed. Anagnostopoulos returned these videos with her comments on the students' analysis and their final course grade. The class never met face-to-face, though the master's in technology students invited Anagnostopoulos and Basmadjian to speak to their face-to-face master's class about designing and teaching online courses.

The course Web site served as the central means and method of communication for the course, effectively serving as the "classroom." Through the Web site, students could access assignments, link to relevant external Web sites, obtain a class roster with student e-mail addresses, and view their grades via an electronic grade book. The course syllabus was also accessible on the Web site. The Web site incorporated a range of spaces in which students could interact with each other and with Anagnostopoulos and Basmadjian. These included asynchronous WebTalk postings and individual e-mails. Students e-mailed Anagnostopoulos their required course essays. She commented on these essays via e-mail and the electronic grade book. Finally, Anagnostopoulos and four students held three real-time synchronous chats in which student participation was voluntary. During the last

third of the semester, Anagnostopoulos e-mailed the class asking if students wanted to try the chat forum. Only students who lived in Michigan participated in the Class Chats.

DATA COLLECTION

During the semester that Anagnostopoulos and Basmadjian taught the on-line course, we printed all of the texts that the students and we produced throughout the semester. We did not begin analysis of these texts until March 2002, a year after we taught the course. After an initial reading of all the texts, we decided to confine our analysis for this study to the whole-class WebTalk postings and the Class Chats. The majority of the class tasks required students to post responses through whole-class WebTalk. As such, the WebTalk represented the classroom's primary social space. Though the Class Chats were voluntary (only half the class participated), we chose to analyze them because their synchronous nature contrasted with the asynchronous nature of the WebTalk. The two types of forums could provide for different opportunities to recombine time and space, and thus, we hypothesized, examining them could shed light on the different ways the disembodied nature of the virtual classroom can shape how teachers and students construct social space and interactions in the virtual classroom.

WEBTALK

In our virtual classroom, the whole-class WebTalk served as the "common space" where students and teachers could post messages for all to read. Typically, these posted messages were responses to a list of questions that related to the assigned readings or video materials. A typical task that required students to post a response to WebTalk is represented below. The task contains a general introduction and then a list of questions about the specific course readings or videotaped materials. The deadline for posting responses was written at the bottom of the questions. Students could access WebTalk directly by clicking on a button that appeared at the very bottom of the task.

Section 1: WebTalk 1.4

Think about your own classroom teaching and in particular your reasons for using discussions with literature. Post a response to the questions listed below to your classmates using WebTalk:

*Why do you use/not use discussions when teaching literature in your classroom?

*How are your reasons addressed in the readings, in particular those by Dillon and Gall & Gall? How might these authors react to your reasons for using/not using discussion in the classroom?

*Of the outcomes identified by these authors, which do you see as most important in terms of what you hope students learn by participating in discussions around literature in your classroom? Why are these outcomes most important to you?

Deadline: Tuesday, January 23, 2001

It was not possible to send an anonymous posting to WebTalk; each posting included the date and time it was submitted, a title, and the e-mail address and name of the sender. Because some of the students used other people's computers, however, their own names did not appear on those postings they sent from these computers. Once the teacher or student entered his or her response in the Message Box and clicked on the Submit button, his or her response was posted to the Web site and visible to the class. Students could post as many messages as they desired. In the second half of the semester, Anagnostopoulos and Basmadjian required students to post responses to at least one other student's posting for each WebTalk.

CLASS CHATS

Anagnostopoulos initiated the Class Chats because she hoped that the synchronous nature of the Class Chats would afford better opportunities than the WebTalk to engage in substantive discussions that moved beyond the questions listed with each task. Anagnostopoulos held three chat sessions, all near the end of the term. Both she and the students were new to this forum.

With the Class Chat, the teacher and students agreed to log on, at a specified time, to the course Web site from their various locations and time zones. When the teacher or students posted questions or responses, they were sent instantaneously to everyone who was online. The posts made during the Class Chats were limited by the space provided for messages in the interface. This was different than in the WebTalk, where this constraint did not exist. In the WebTalk, students and teachers could post lengthy responses. This was not possible in the Class Chat. Like the WebTalk, the Class Chats did not allow anonymous postings.

DATA ANALYSIS

The course contained a total of 14 WebTalk sessions and 3 Class Chat sessions. In our first round of analysis, we examined all 14 WebTalk sessions and all 3 Class Chat sessions. We selected 4 WebTalk sessions and 2 Class

Chats for further analysis. These selected WebTalk sessions occurred within the first, third, and fourth sections of the course, thus allowing us to identify persistent patterns and changes in the structure of social relations over the semester. We selected sessions to analyze according to several criteria. First, most if not all of the students participated in each of the four WebTalk sessions. This choice reflected our interest in how all students, including those who did not know each other from previous contexts, interacted with each other to position themselves and the teacher and to shape the participation patterns of the class. The discourse patterns were actually established by WebTalks in the first section of the class, in which a majority of students participated. Second, the tasks to which the students' postings responded represent the range of tasks assigned throughout the course. Third, two of the four sessions occurred before and two occurred after we began requiring students to respond to at least one other student's WebTalk posting. Finally, we did not analyze the second Class Chat because it was roughly half the length of the other chats and thus did not provide the extended transcripts to identify the moves teachers and students employed to interact with, and sometimes against, each other in the chat space.

The central goal of our analysis was to specify how teachers and students constructed social relations as they interacted in different spaces in the case study virtual classroom to understand better the challenges of teaching in the online classroom. In particular, our analysis of the classroom transcripts focused on identifying how teachers and students' social interactions both reacted to and manifested the disembedding of social relations that Giddens identifies as a central element of globalization. Further, we attended to whether and how these interactions manifested and were constructed through a democratized discourse and synthetic personalization, or the shifting of personal, lifeworld discourse into the public space of the classroom. Here, we wanted to understand whether and how the virtual environment afforded students the space to exert control within and over the classroom, and conversely, whether and how it facilitated the expansion of the expert system of education into their personal lives, exposing them to scrutiny.

Because all of our data were printed texts, we focused our analysis of WebTalk and Class Chat transcripts around the analytic properties of texts most relevant to the manifestation and construction of social relations in discourse: interactional control, modality, politeness, and ethos (Fairclough, 1992). We used the proposition as our unit of analysis, defining a proposition as a statement about one idea, opinion, or emotion that included a claim and that could also include statements that elaborated or supported the claim. In some cases, propositions were quite extensive. For example, a student might express his or her opinion in relation to an idea from one of

the course readings and use evidence from his or her teaching practice to support his or her view of that idea. This would constitute a single proposition. On the other hand, a student might post simply, "I agree with you," in response to a classmate's message. If there was no further elaboration on the proposition being agreed with, we counted this statement as a proposition.

We used the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to code propositions in the WebTalk and Class Chat sessions. Drawing on the analytic properties of texts Fairclough identified, we coded the propositions in both teacher and student postings, noting which propositions were not adequately categorized by these properties. After several rounds of coding with one another, we constructed rules for defining a proposition and focused our analysis on interactional control features, modality, and ethos. As we continued to code the propositions using these categories, we expanded our general coding to include propositions that did not fall neatly into Fairclough's categories. After refining our coding scheme, we coded the first WebTalk session together and then coded two more WebTalk transcripts separately. We reached a reliability of 79.5% for the number of propositions and 97% for the analytic properties.

Analytic Properties of Class Postings

Interactional control features include turn taking, exchange structure, topic control, control of agendas and formulation. These features broadly have to do with ensuring that interactions run smoothly at the organizational level, that is, that turns are distributed smoothly, topics are selected, questions are answered, etc. The most relevant interactional control features that emerged as we coded the WebTalks and Class Chats were topic control and formulation.

Topic control refers to propositions that establish and direct the substance and focus of the discourse. Asking questions is the predominant way in which topic control is established, though requests for information or ideas can establish the focus of the discourse. In the example below, from Class Chat 1, Anagnostopoulos exerts topic control through a question (the symbol "//" marks the end of a proposition):

Anagnostopoulos: Well, Leslie, so far it's just me and you. I'm a bit uncertain with this as well. Plus this screen is kind of annoying.// Anyways, maybe we could just talk about what's been going on in your classroom as far as discussions. What did you find out about the nature of talk in your classroom in terms of the predominant types of discussion patterns?//

Here, Anagnostopoulos's final question frames the focus of the chat as being about Leslie's learning about the participation patterns around discussions in her own classroom. Students also established topic control. In the following example, Leslie establishes the topic through requesting more information from a student about her teaching practices:

Leslie: I would certainly like to hear how June organizes her student-led, student-centered discussions. I have such a hard time getting my class to do that format and still cover the benchmarks and goals.//

The two examples illustrate how topic control can be established both through requests for more information and through questions.

Formulation refers to propositions—including questions—that summarize, characterize, elaborate or explicate a previous part of the conversation. Formulation is usually a marker of power, as it affords the person who makes a formulating statement the opportunity to restate and reconfigure other people's propositions and to probe other participants for further information or ideas.

Modality refers to the affinity with which a person invests his or her talk or written text. People express their commitment to or against the statements they make as a means not only to express their beliefs, but also to create solidarity or division between themselves and others. People use both verbal and nonverbal cues, such as gestures and tone of voice, to signal modality. Because interaction in our online class was mediated only by written texts, we could not get a complete sense of the degree of affinity towards some proposition that students were expressing. In order to avoid overinterpreting the texts, we narrowed our definition of modality to focus on whether the teacher or students explicitly referred to themselves or others as the author of a given proposition and whether they explicitly agreed or disagreed with a proposition. Though this limited our ability to determine affinity with a proposition, it still allowed us to identify how teachers and students constructed social relations in the virtual classroom. It is largely through making explicit the authorship of a proposition that teachers and students made themselves and others present in the physical absence and disembeddedness that characterizes the virtual environment.

Fairclough identifies two types of modality. *Subjective modality* is marked by the use of phrases such as "I think" and "I believe" that make the subjective basis of a person's affinity with a statement explicit. In the virtual classroom, the use of subjective modality is one way in which teachers and students can make themselves present and exert a sense of ownership over their responses and ideas. We coded propositions as subjective modality when they began with phrases that used either "I" or "We." For example, Nolan posts:

I often use discussion to teach literature in my 6th grade Language Arts/Social Studies classroom for a number of reasons. First, discussion promotes a better understanding of the material. Some novels that we read, such as our present one, *The Master Puppeteer*, by Katherine Paterson, contain vocabulary that is challenging for some students. Also, some very descriptive sections of the work, especially where Japanese Bunraku puppet performances are referred to, are often confusing. Discussion clarifies these areas for the students, and it also allows us to summarize the key points and events of the story. (Web Talk 1.4)

Nolan's use of personal pronouns "I," "we," and "us" throughout this proposition clearly signals that his statements and ideas are his own. The subjective nature of modality here is further reinforced by Nolan's use of illustrative examples from his own classroom, displaying that not only are the ideas expressed about discussion his own, but they derive from his own experiences.

Objective modality, in contrast, is marked by the absence of such phrases that identify the speaker. It is difficult to determine who is speaking or who or what is being voiced when objective modality is used. In the virtual classroom, the use of objective modality can establish a teacher or student as an expert, as it allows an individual to project his or her own perspective as a universally accepted one. Or objective modality can obscure the teacher or students' presence, as propositions that express this type of modality may serve as the vehicle for someone else's perspective. We coded propositions as objective modality when they were direct statements with no specified speaker pronoun attached to them. This often resulted in these statements appearing as if they were dictums or edicts that could not be contested. For example, Andrea writes:

This method does not allow for democratic participation because it does not allow very many people to participate. In this type of discussion the dialogue is limited to an individual or small group and the teacher. Due to this small number of people who participate, this discussion cannot be considered to be very democratic. (Web Talk 4.3)

As we coded the transcripts, we found it necessary to create a third category of modality: *intersubjective modality*. This type of modality is signaled by explicit references to another person's statement, and serves to create solidarity and familiarity with that person. An example of intersubjective modality is Gina's posting:

Heather, I agree with your comments, especially the "blurring out" of answers. Discussion would be inhibited if each student raised their

hand and waited to be called on before giving their opinion on a subject that they are excited about. I find the blurting out seems to help keep the discussions going and other ideas forthcoming. It also assists others in triggering different ideas that may not have come to light if the more formal “one student speaking at a time” rule is enforced. We as teachers need to keep “order” so everyone is heard. (Web Talk 1.1)

In the virtual classroom, intersubjective modality represents one property of discourse that allows teachers and students to locate each other and to construct degrees of familiarity with each other as well as with the substance of the statements being posted. We coded propositions as intersubjective modality only when they included phrases that explicitly named another student or the teacher and expressed some level of agreement or disagreement with a proposition posted by that individual.

Fairclough uses *ethos* to refer to the wider processes of modeling in which people construct the place and time of an interaction and its sets of participants by drawing on particular discourses from other domains or settings. Fairclough gives the example of alternative medicine, which involves positioning the doctor as a sympathetic, caring listener and the exam as a scene in which the patient can unburden himself of his troubles. This contrasts with the techno-scientific ethos in which the doctor is positioned as an objective expert and the patient as an object of inspection rather than a person invested with emotion. In the case of this study, we focused our analysis on identifying when our students and we evoked a “lifeworld” ethos. We categorized statements as “lifeworld” if they centered on students sharing problems they faced as teachers, asking for help in dealing with these problems, or expressing frustration with their jobs. The lifeworld ethos included propositions through which students brought the problems of their personal or professional life into the discussion. For example, Heather posts:

I do not use discussion as often as I would like because of time constraints. A perfect example is right now in my classroom. I feel SO pressured to focus solely on the MEAP [Michigan Educational Assessment Program] test that most of my instructional time is dedicated to it. I am really looking forward to when I have more autonomy regarding my curriculum planning. (WebTalk 1.4)

In this example, Heather complains about the pressure of the state assessment (MEAP) and how it imposes severe time constraints on her. Later, in the following section, we allude to this particular lifeworld ethos, as stu-

dents initiated and repeatedly returned to the topic of standards and accountability during one of the two Class Chats we analyzed.

FINDINGS

As we noted above, the whole-class WebTalk served as the central social space in our online classroom. In this section, we examine how Anagnostopoulos positioned herself and was positioned by the students in the WebTalk sessions. Then we examine how students organized their postings and social interactions.

THE DECENTERED TEACHER IN A TEACHER-CENTERED CLASSROOM

Anagnostopoulos posted one response in each of the first two WebTalk sessions (1.1 and 1.4) that we analyzed. Excerpts from these postings are cited below.

WebTalk 1.1

Anagnostopoulos: Several themes run throughout the web-postings.// First, people have identified the following elements as components of a discussion: 1) the presentation and challenging of ideas and opinions; 2) the existence of a focus topic; 3) an equality amongst participants, and 4) passionate involvement by participants.// The first element emphasizes the debate nature of discussions. Discussions, as the class has defined them, are “dialogic.” . . . // A question that the web-posting raised for me is why we avoid using the term “conflict.” Why are we more comfortable with “debate,” and “sharing ideas”? How does the fact that we are having discussions in classrooms and with young people affect how we describe and think about them? How does the very real and important necessity that teachers manage classrooms set the parameters of discussions? Does this affect the depth we can achieve in discussions?

WebTalk 1.4

Anagnostopoulos: As I reread the articles in light of my recent work with secondary English student teachers here at MSU [Michigan State University]—I was again struck by the difficulties of holding discussions in our classrooms and the multiplicity of goals that we hope we can achieve through discussions.// . . . I have tried to alter the relations over time through using small groups, having students lead discussions of readings and generally trying to remove myself from the

central focal point of the class. It's amazing how the students still look towards me when they talk. . . . It's amazing even when there is no right answer how the students still want some affirmation of correctness from the teacher!// . . . Martin's comments also remind me of my student teachers' central reasons for not having discussions—students don't do the reading. I've suggested ways of getting students involved in reading the text through various small group activities that require students to make claims and find supporting evidence about a character, theme or perspective in a literary work. But, the student teachers resist.//

Anagnostopoulos's postings differed dramatically in terms of their discourse properties. Table 1 indicates the modality, ethos, and interactional control features of the propositions we identified in both postings, excerpts of which are presented above. The first posting contained the power markers typical of conventional teacher discourse and reflective of teachers' classroom authority. As shown in Table 1, 9 of the 17 propositions Anagnostopoulos posted were formulations. These propositions are exemplified in the opening sentences of the first excerpt. Anagnostopoulos summarized and elaborated upon the main points students made in the previous postings. She followed this formulation with a series of questions. We categorized these as topic control, as they represented new directions for the WebTalk. Anagnostopoulos's final proposition in the posting (not quoted above) was evaluative. She wrote, "I think that you have constructed a solid definition of discussion that we can consider and reconsider in light of the course readings." Significantly, no students responded directly to

Table 1. Analytic properties of teacher WebTalk postings by proposition

Session	1.1	1.4
Modality		
Objective	5	2
Subjective	8	8
Intersubjective	4	3
Total	17	13
Interactional control		
"Lifeworld" ethos	0	5
Agree	1	1
Formulation	9	7
Topic Control	6	0
Evaluation	1	0
Total	17	13

Anagnostopoulos's posting. They responded only to the prescribed questions, with some students referring to previous students' postings. Thus, even though Anagnostopoulos's posting contained the power markers of conventional teacher-centered discourse, the students' decisions not to respond to her posting highly attenuated this power.

In Anagnostopoulos's second posting, to WebTalk 1.4, the power markers typically associated with teacher discourse and prevalent in her first posting are almost entirely eliminated. She posed only one question that was rhetorical, stating towards the end of the posting, "There's a lot of forces working against these goals (of open discussions), but I still think they are worth pursuing. What's the alternative?" Though over half of the propositions were formulations, Anagnostopoulos significantly decreased her use of objective modality. Further, the posting evoked a lifeworld ethos that increased as Anagnostopoulos described the frustrations and challenges she encountered leading discussions with her preservice student teachers. The lifeworld propositions positioned Anagnostopoulos as an empathetic figure and constructed the WebTalk as a space in which the teacher's experiences were open to reflection and evaluation. Significantly, Anagnostopoulos's lifeworlds talk also worked to disguise her disagreement with the students who had posted before her. In the two postings prior to Anagnostopoulos's, students gave reasons for not using discussions. In her posting, Anagnostopoulos placed these comments in the voices of the student teachers who frustrated her attempts to lead and teach discussions. She thus submerged her challenge to the students' WebTalk postings in a lifeworld talk rather than employing the teacher's right to evaluate students directly. Again, no students responded to Anagnostopoulos's posting.

Responding to the Generalized Teacher

In contrast to their lack of response to Anagnostopoulos's WebTalk postings, the students structured their own postings by importing recitation, a conventional, teacher-centered discourse, into this space. The first student posting to the first WebTalk 1.1 was critical in establishing this structure. Excerpts from this posting follow:

WebTalk 1.1

**What are the characteristics of a discussion?*

I think discussion includes questioning, point of view, support of statements, challenging of ideas, active listening and personal reflection.

**How do discussions differ from other forms of talk?*

I believe discussion has a focal point in which . . . lingo, setting, and social skills may play a bigger role in other talks.

**How do discussions in classrooms compare and contrast to discussions in other venues, e.g., workplaces, conversational settings, families?*

In outside venues I often find people using different tones or word selections. . . . I think both of the students also feel a shift in their comfort levels at these times.

**How do you know when a discussion takes place in a classroom?*

I mentioned active listening before. . . . Finally, I think discussion occurs when someone is forced to reflect on or question his or her understanding through an oral sharing.

**How do you know when a discussion around a piece of literature is taking place?*

I have tried to categorize the main themes that come up during a literature discussion in my classroom. They are character analysis, problem identification, possible solutions, solution chosen by author and its consequences, and how the story relates to our lives.

The student typed the first question exactly as it was written in the task assignment and then typed her response to it. She followed this by typing the second question and her response, continuing in this pattern until she had responded to all assigned questions in the order they were listed in the task assignment. All of the students followed this format to structure their responses to the first WebTalk session. Over the course of the semester, students adhered less strictly to this pattern, but even in the fourth-section WebTalks, they continued to respond to each of the questions listed in the task assignment in the order they were listed.

The students' simultaneous ignoring of the teacher's individual postings and importation of the recitation structure decentered the actual teacher even as it constructed the WebTalk as a teacher-centered social space. As they adhered to the recitation format, the students ceded authority to define the tasks and to direct their postings to the generalized teacher present in the prescribed tasks. At the same time, because they chose not to address the actual teacher's postings, the students limited the teacher's power to evaluate their responses. The students' responses to the actual and the generalized teachers in the WebTalk sessions thus illustrate how conventional power relations were inscribed and rearticulated in the virtual classroom space. The generalized teacher maintained the authority to define

tasks and pose prescribed questions. The students' decentering of the actual teacher, however, undermined her authority to evaluate their responses and to formulate new propositions and initiate new topics to further direct students' classroom actions.

STUDENT INTERACTION IN THE WEBTALK: INTERSUBJECTIVE POWER

The students' importation of conventional teacher/student discourse and social relations and their simultaneous decentering of the actual teacher contributed to and were products of the ways in which students positioned themselves and each other in the WebTalk space. Before analyzing the discourse properties of the students' WebTalk postings, it is important to specify the tasks to which the students were responding and, in particular, how the tasks positioned students as "professional" or "learner."

Controlling Course Content

The four WebTalk sessions we analyzed can be divided into tasks that positioned students as "professionals" and those that positioned students as "learners." Tasks 1.1 and 3.3 positioned students as professionals. Task 1.1 asked students to draw on their teaching experiences to formulate a definition of discussion, positioning the students as knowledgeable and legitimizing their experience as valuable. The third task, 3.3, asked students to explain why they believed students did not participate in open discussions, "based on both [their] own experiences and what is suggested in the article." The remaining two questions asked students to identify the skills and dispositions students and teachers needed to participate in open discussions but did not identify which source of knowledge, their experience or the course reading, they should draw upon to do so. The failure to name the author or the title of the article, and the way in which it is referenced after the students' experiences, positioned students' experiences as the primary knowledge source. Like 1.1, then, this task also constructed students as knowledgeable professionals.

In contrast, Tasks 1.4 and 4.3 positioned the students as "learners," a much more conventional positioning. The task for the second WebTalk (1.4) that we analyzed required students to explain why they did or did not use discussions in their classrooms, to compare these reasons to the views expressed in three course readings, to describe how the authors of these readings would react to their reasons, and to identify which of the discussion outcomes explicated in the readings they thought were the most important. This task positioned the students as knowledgeable but also open to critique by external experts, here, the authors of the course readings.

Similarly, Task 4.3 required students to read an excerpt from a book about sociolinguistics and literacy and to comment on the democratic potential and appropriate use of the Socratic dialogue method. The task introduction referenced the book's author twice, by name, but never referenced students' experiences.

Our analysis of the discourse properties of the students' WebTalk postings reveals that the students responded in patterned ways to the different types of tasks. Table 2 indicates that the majority of the students' propositions in response to Tasks 1.1 and 3.3, which positioned them as professionals, were written in the objective modality. For example, Andrea posted the following in response to Task 1.1:

A discussion occurs when there is a verbal exchange of ideas between at least two people. In a discussion, people are relating to, gaining understanding, and/or stating opinions on a certain topic.

While the task asked students to draw on their own experiences to come up with a definition of discussion, Andrea's statement lacks any explicit personal references. She does not use any personal pronouns or examples. Instead, she presents a decontextualized, impersonal definition of discussion.

In contrast, in response to Tasks 1.4 and 4.3, which positioned students as "learners," the majority of the students' propositions expressed a subjective modality. For example, Julia posted the following in response to Task 1.4:

I, like Sorenson [author of one of the articles], find that students attempt to make eye contact with me to see if they are correct, seeming to almost ask silently for some "sign" that they are on the "right" track.

Unlike Andrea, Julia used personal pronouns and drew on her own teaching experiences to explain her response to the reading. Further, she

Table 2. Modality of student WebTalk propositions

Modality	Session							
	1.1		1.4		3.3		4.3	
Objective	39	(31.5%)	23	(16%)	52	(49.5%)	29	(35.8%)
Subjective	66	(53.2%)	113	(78.5%)	34	(32.4%)	44	(54.3%)
Intersubjective	19	(15.3%)	8	(5.5%)	19	(18.1%)	8	(9.9%)
Total	124		144		105		81	

positioned herself as equal to the author, placing the pronoun “I” before she referenced the author.

In both cases, the students’ use of the different modalities enabled them to assert their power within the WebTalk space. When they used the subjective modality to respond to course readings, the students made their authorship of their postings and propositions explicit. Subjective modality made it possible for students to assert their opinions over and into the readings. When students’ own experiences were the primary sources of knowledge, they wrote more frequently in the objective modality, constructing their statements as universals. The modality of the students’ propositions suggests that the WebTalk space thus afforded students the opportunities to assert power over the course content.

Constructing Student Solidarity

Though students used intersubjective modality much less frequently than they did the other types of modality, the intersubjective propositions served as key structuring devices. Table 3 reports the number of intersubjective propositions that appeared in the students’ WebTalk postings and their effect. Solidarity refers to propositions through which students expressed their agreement with another student’s proposition(s). Overall, over half (29 of 50) of the intersubjective propositions involved students agreeing with each other or constructing a lifeworld setting.

Table 3 further indicates that in all four sessions, students used intersubjective propositions for formulation. In these cases, students typically expanded upon other students’ proposition(s) by offering an example from their own teaching experience and then posited a universal claim about teaching, students, or discussion. For example, in Session 3.3, John posted the following response to Ellen’s posting:

Ellen, with regards to the teacher making great efforts not to being the center of attention all of the time I completely agree. I find myself often jumping into the discussion way too much even when I think I

Table 3. Students’ use of intersubjective modality propositions

Session	1.1	1.4	3.3	4.3	Total
Solidarity	4	7	1	4	16
Lifeworlds	1	5	7	0	13
Formulation	5	1	11	4	21
Total	10	13	19	8	50

am making a conscience [*sic*] effort not to.// I believe this is where scaffolding and modeling come into play. In order for students to take charge of their own discussion they need to be given a structure in which to develop and operate.

John first stated his agreement with Ellen's proposition and then elaborated the proposition by drawing on his teaching experience, noting that he tends toward "jumping into the discussion way too much." He moved, next, to extend Ellen's proposition by making a new claim about the importance of "scaffolding" and "modeling." The intersubjective modality of John's first proposition enabled him to create solidarity and familiarity with another student. As he extended the proposition, he claimed the right to formulation traditionally held by the teacher. Through the use of intersubjective formulations, the students asserted a type of intersubjective power in the WebTalk space.

CLASS CHATS: CONVENTIONAL TEACHER/STUDENT RELATIONS AND STUDENTS' "LIFEWORLD" SOLIDARITY

The Class Chat differed from the WebTalk in two important ways. First, the chat was synchronous rather than asynchronous; the teacher and students could communicate with each other instantaneously, much more like a phone conversation than the asynchronous WebTalk postings. Secondly, there were no prescribed assignments for the Class Chats. Anagnostopoulos and the students simply agreed to explore the chat forum together. The lack of prescribed assignments and the fact that neither Anagnostopoulos nor the students had ever participated in a Class Chat before meant that the chats were uncharted space in our case study virtual classroom.

Because there were no prescribed tasks for the Class Chats, the issue of topic control was central to our analysis. In both chats, Anagnostopoulos brought the chat to order. In the first chat, she did so by first asking students to introduce themselves and then identifying the first topic. This introduction follows:

Well, Lisa, so far it's just me and you. I'm a bit uncertain about this all, as well. Plus this screen is kind of annoying. Anyway, maybe we could just talk about what's been going on in your classroom as far as discussions. What did you find out about the nature of the talk in your classroom in terms of the predominate types of discussion patterns?

Though Anagnostopoulos drew attention to her own uncertainty in the Class Chat space, she asserted her authority to direct the students' actions and to establish the topic for talk. The topic she identified positioned the

students' own teaching as both the focus of the talk and open to evaluation and critique. Anagnostopoulos opened the second chat we analyzed with the following:

Hi, Jill. As we wait for others to enter the Chat room, do you have any questions for me or concerns about the course or any assignments.// I enjoyed reading your web response about the teacher-led, student-centered discussion. Your discomfort was interesting.

Though the class has not yet convened at this moment, Anagnostopoulos's postings manifested conventional teacher/student social relations. She commented on and evaluated the student's work and directed the focus of the talk onto the substance and procedures of the class. Further, her last comment signaled, again, the students' obligation to be critiqued and evaluated. When another student entered the chat room, Anagnostopoulos "convened" the talk by saying:

Okay I was struck by the different experiences you both had with leading the teacher-led, student-centered discussion. Jill said that she was a bit uncomfortable with this type of discussion, while Betty said that she was very comfortable with it. I was wondering if we could talk about how you have experienced the different types of discussions presented in this course. Which ones have you felt more comfortable and least comfortable with and why?

Anagnostopoulos signaled the beginning of the official talk with "Okay" and proceeded to use the students' propositions from a previous WebTalk posting to formulate the topic for the chat. She then used the formulation to ask a question that further refined this topic. Though Anagnostopoulos's "I was wondering" mitigated the baldness (Fairclough, 1992) of her claim to control the topic in the as-yet-uncharted social space of the chat, she clearly assumed the teacher's authority over topic control and formulation.

Though the right to establish topic control is a power marker, whether and to what extent other people take up one's topics indicates the amount of power one actually wields within a particular social setting. Table 4 identifies the number of topics Anagnostopoulos and the students proposed in the two Class Chats we analyzed and the number of propositions students posted in response to these topics. Anagnostopoulos proposed more topics than the students, signaling the teacher's right to establish the content of classroom talk. When students proposed a topic, however, they elicited more student propositions, on average, than Anagnostopoulos did. When she proposed a topic, it prompted an average of four student propositions, while student topics prompted an average of nine student propositions.

Table 4. Number of topics raised and average response to each

	Number of topics	Student propositions in response to topic	
		Total	Average per topic
Teacher-generated topics:			
Chat 1	9	36	4
Chat 2	8	57	7
Student-generated topics:			
Chat 1	3	18	6
Chat 2	3	27	9

This pattern held in the second chat we analyzed as well. While the average number of student propositions responding to a topic proposed by Anagnostopoulos rose in the second chat, the average number of student propositions responding to student topics remained somewhat higher.

This finding suggests that the Class Chat afforded opportunities both for the teacher to reinscribe traditional teacher-student relations and for students to rearticulate the power distribution within these social relations. Anagnostopoulos asserted the teacher's right to pose questions and structure classroom talk. At the same time students asserted power over topic control as well. Our analyses of the discourse properties of Anagnostopoulos's and the students' postings in the Class Chats further substantiates this finding.

Table 5 reports our analysis of the discourse properties of Anagnostopoulos's Class Chat propositions. Over the course of the chats, the power markers became more prominent in these propositions, an exact reverse of the

Table 5. Analytic properties of teacher propositions in class chats

Chat Session	1	2
Modality		
Objective	19	17
Subjective	17	6
Intersubjective	1	4
Total	37	27
Type		
Respond to student	3	0
Respond to teacher	6	1
Agree with student	3	0
"Lifeworld" ethos	4	0
Topic control	14	17
Formulation	7	9
Total	37	27

patterns we found in Anagnostopoulos's WebTalk postings. In the first chat, Anagnostopoulos's propositions were almost equally divided between objective and subjective modality. In the second chat, her propositions were overwhelmingly objective. Similarly, while Anagnostopoulos responded to three student topics, posted three propositions that signaled her agreement with students' responses, and evoked a lifeworld ethos four times in the first chat, none of her propositions in the second chat did so. All but one of Anagnostopoulos's propositions in the second chat were attempts either to establish and maintain topic control or at formulation, both traditional teacher rights.

Students, however, also exerted considerable power over the interactions in the Class Chats. Table 6 reports the analytic properties of student propositions in the chats. The table suggests that the students constructed a relatively high degree of solidarity with one another. In the second chat, a full 27% of the students' propositions expressed intersubjective modality. Further, almost the same percentage of the propositions constructed a lifeworld ethos. The majority of the lifeworld propositions revolved around the students' frustrations with the state assessment. Leslie was the first to introduce this topic in the second chat:

Leslie: I would certainly like to hear how Jill organizes her student-led, student-centered discussions. I have such a hard time getting my class to do that format and still cover my benchmarks and goals. Hi Heather!

Heather: Benchmarks and goals! So much accountability in our district. It does make it hard to schedule many of the discussions . . . or as many as I would like to!

Table 6. Analytic properties of student propositions in class chats

Chat session	1	2
Modality		
Objective	5	6
Subjective	48	56
Intersubjective	9	23
Total	62	85
Type		
Respond to student	10	15
Respond to teacher	23	32
Agree with student	8	6
"Lifeworld" ethos	11	22
Topic control	4	4
Formulation	6	6
Total	62	85

Students continued commiserating about the state assessments for five more postings from four different students. These postings contributed to a lifeworld ethos. The chat became a space for students to unburden themselves of their frustrations. After the fifth posting, Anagnostopoulos brought the conversation back to discussions of literature, posting the following:

Anagnostopoulos: How do you structure your talk about literature to meet the benchmarks?

The conversation then turned to ways in which the teachers addressed state- and district-imposed curriculum standards. Studies of testing and teaching (Anagnostopoulos, 2005; Corbett & Wilson, 1991; Grant, 2001; Smith, 1991) suggest that issues related to testing, standards, and accountability are almost universally critiqued by teachers. As such, they constitute an important part of teachers' lifeworld ethos. The Class Chats provided opportunities for the students to develop solidarity among each other. Anagnostopoulos, too, participated in this lifeworld ethos. Towards the end of this chat, she wrote:

That's another problem. The way that districts and states assess students—the tests that are holding everyone “accountable”—probably should be very different than the ways teachers assess their students. The tests serve different purposes. Often people don't realize that. State and district tests serve policy-makers' purposes of comparing across schools and districts. How have they informed your work at the classroom level? (Class Chat 2)

As Anagnostopoulos inserted herself into the lifeworld setting the students constructed, she altered the focus of the discussion, shifting it away from students unburdening their problems and towards further examination of their teaching. While the Class Chat space afforded students the opportunity to construct a lifeworld ethos in which they shared their common frustrations, it also allowed the teacher to use the lifeworld ethos to push for further inspection of the students' professional lives.

DISCUSSION

Our analyses of the discourse properties of teacher and student postings in both the WebTalk and Class Chat forums illuminate the possibilities for the recombining of time and space and the rearticulation of conventional and new social relations afforded by the disembedded environment of the virtual classrooms. The asynchronous nature of the WebTalk forum allowed

students to decenter the teacher and her authority in this social space. Though students organized their WebTalk postings by importing a conventional teacher-centered recitation format into this space, the asynchronous nature of the forum made it possible for them to ignore the questions posed by the teacher's own WebTalk postings. Whether the teacher positioned herself in the WebTalk space as an authority who possessed the right to guide and direct the classroom talk or as an empathetic peer, students did not respond to her postings. The radical reduction of power markers and the use of democratized discourse in Anagnostopoulos's second WebTalk postings reflected the degree to which her power as the teacher was highly attenuated in the social space of the WebTalk.

The students' decisions to ignore the teacher's WebTalk postings, while at the same time addressing each task's prescribed questions in a question/answer format, constructed the WebTalk as a generalized classroom space in which students routinized their interactions with the teacher by reinscribing traditional recitation practices. Within this generalized classroom space, the actual teacher was marginalized; students made her virtually invisible. Significantly, after the second section of the class, Anagnostopoulos decided not to post her own responses to the whole-class WebTalk and sent comments and responses to students on their postings via e-mail and the electronic grade book. The teacher was thus relegated to the back stages (Goffman, 1973) of the classroom.

Our analysis of the students' own WebTalk postings further illuminates how the students constructed the WebTalk as a teacher-centered, student-controlled social space. Students' use of both objective and subjective modality enabled them to assert some authority over and in relation to the course content. Students tended to use subjective modality more often when the course tasks positioned them as "learners" and the readings as "experts." In these cases, the use of subjective modality allowed the students to stake explicit ownership over their postings, to bring their experiences and ideas to bear upon the readings, and to position them as equally valid as the readings. Similarly, when the course tasks positioned students as "professionals," their use of objective modality constructed their own experiences and the practical knowledge they gained through them as universal. Finally, the students' use of intersubjective modality enabled them to establish their power in the WebTalk space. The students referred explicitly to each other's postings to express agreement and affinity with each other and to extend and elaborate upon each other's responses, a right traditionally possessed by the teacher.

The Class Chats afforded different possibilities for the construction of social space and relations. The synchronous nature of this forum meant that the teacher and students were more present to each other than in the asynchronous WebTalk. While the asynchronous nature of the WebTalk forum allowed students to make themselves absent when the teacher posted

her questions, it was more difficult for them to do this in the Class Chats. Further, while the WebTalk space allowed students to ignore the questions and formulations posted by the teacher, to do so in the Class Chat forum would have violated the norms of even the most basic, informal conversations.

In our case study virtual classroom, the Class Chats offered the teacher the possibility to reinscribe conventional classroom social relations. The teacher's postings in the Class Chats contained the power markers traditionally associated with teacher discourse. Over the course of the chats, these power markers increased in number, an increase exactly the reverse of what occurred over the course of the teacher's WebTalk postings. In the Class Chats, the teacher asserted topic control and pushed students to extend and elaborate upon their responses. Further, by the second chat, the teacher eliminated her own use of lifeworld talk and explicit statements of agreement with, and response to, student propositions.

At the same time, while the teacher reinscribed a highly conventional teacher discourse, the students constructed the Class Chats as a lifeworld space. Though students posed fewer topics for discussion in the chats, they posted more responses to these topics, on average, than they did to those topics posed by the teacher. Further, particularly in the second chat, several of the students' postings evoked a lifeworld ethos in which the classroom became a space where they could commiserate and unburden themselves of their frustrations and problems.

In effect, both the WebTalk and the Class Chats became, over time, hybrid spaces, marked both by the importation of conventional classroom discourse and the rearticulation of the social relations manifested by this discourse. This hybridity reflects the possibilities the virtual classroom affords for the creation of new forms of social relations and interactions. Because social space and relations are radically disembedded within the virtual classroom, teachers and students can both import preestablished social conventions and rearticulate these conventions in ways that redistribute classroom power. Further, this rearticulation is engendered and constrained by the separation of time and space and the possibilities for recombining them afforded by the different forums within a virtual classroom.

COMING TO TERMS WITH THE DECENTERED TEACHER

Rather than drawing a series of prescriptions from this study, we think it is important for online teachers to consider the challenges and potential of being decentered in the classroom. Our study suggests that because of the separation of time and space, students can position the individual teacher on the sidelines, or on the backstages, of the classroom, even as they engage in the tasks created and assigned by the teacher. While teachers maintain

control over tasks and grades, in the online classroom the teacher's control of social interaction is attenuated. The online teacher has fewer options and tools for monitoring and controlling student participation and interaction where participation and interaction are entirely text-based. In contrast, even in a student-centered face-to-face classroom, the teacher's physical presence provides sensory cues that enable her to monitor student work. Sounds, sights, gestures, and social intuition all enable a teacher to sense and respond to students in the physical environment. These cues and tools are largely absent online. As such, in the virtual classroom teachers may find it more difficult to control the flow of talk and move it toward specific goals and understandings.

While the decentered teacher has fewer options to control student interaction, in the online classroom students have more options to exert control. As our analyses illustrate, in the online classroom, students can choose to be absent, to bypass or ignore the teacher, and to respond to peers of their own choosing. Although these moves are possible in a face-to-face classroom, the online teacher has fewer ways to know that it has happened and fewer ways to respond while it is happening. Responses are inherently after the fact because of the separation of time and space. Even in real-time chats, there is a time lapse between writing a response, seeing it on the screen, reading others' postings, and responding.

At heart, the decentering of the teacher in the online classroom reflects the rearticulation of classroom power relations. This means challenges for teachers represent potentials for students. In the online classroom, students have more options to control their own learning, which could increase their engagement and compel them to explore, in more depth, topics in which they are interested. Students can make more connections to their own lives, interacting in a "lifeworld" mode and thus taking what they need from the class. Ultimately the challenge for teachers, then, is to find ways to support, from the sidelines, student independence and solidarity in the hybrid space of the online classroom.

CONCLUSION

We began this study because, as teachers new to the virtual environment, we were struck by how this environment forced us to contend with fundamental questions of teaching. While the study illuminates the possibilities the virtual classroom holds for shifting and re-creating conventional classroom relations, it ultimately leaves us with a series of questions that we hope will be taken up in further research.

The study details the discursive processes by which students can effectively marginalize the actual teacher while responding to the generalized teacher embodied in the prescribed tasks and assignments. This raises

questions about what actually constitutes “teaching” in an online classroom. Is it only the work of planning: developing materials and making them available in a coherent scheme for students to complete? Or is there a place for teachers to mediate between the students and the course content? If the teacher has, or should have, such a place, how does he or she create it and maintain it in the face of students’ power to decenter him or her? Does it require creating a well-defined environment—a new kind of expert system in which students and teachers adhere to new rules of behavior and interaction determined primarily by the teacher?

Further, this study challenges us to examine our assumptions about student-centered classrooms. As virtual classrooms make possible the rearticulation of teacher-student relations, they also make student-controlled social spaces possible. Are these spaces the same as student-centered classrooms? Does the democratized discourse and lifeworld ethos of the virtual classroom signal a shift in social relations towards more student-controlled learning environments? Or as online forums multiply and the availability of virtual classrooms expands, does the incorporation of a lifeworld ethos leave students open to increased scrutiny and evaluation? And finally, what position should the teacher take in this process?

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