CHAPTER 7: APPLYING THE MODEL

Introduction

Online course criticism, a form of educational criticism in the tradition of Elliot Eisner (1985, 1991), depends upon the heightened perceptions of an expert practitioner and a rigorous qualitative research case study methodology as the bases for portrayal and appraisal of individual online courses. This rendering progresses in a narrowing spiral fashion. That is, the actual course is represented in a rich but limited description followed by progressively narrower treatments of interpretation, evaluation, and a few overarching themes. From the themes presented, readers may choose to generalize to other courses. I present the following example of online course criticism in six sections: background, portrayal, methodological side note, appraisal, instructor response, and conclusion.

Background

I elected to study the fall 2003 iteration of English Grammar and Usage (LIN 5675) taught by Dr. Beth Rapp Young at the University of Central Florida (UCF) for four reasons. First, online courses offered by the University of Central Florida have been distinguished by their reliance on institutionally supported models of practice (Hartman, 2002) and common course conventions (Truman-Davis, Futch, Yonekura, and Thompson, 2000). Second, the instructor of this course had been previously recognized with a WebCT Exemplary Course award for a similar course offered at the undergraduate

level. Third, the graduate focus of this course aligned with my interest in adult learners. Finally, the instructor, Dr. Young, was willing to open her course for review.

English Grammar and Usage (LIN 5675) serves as an elective for both the Graduate Certificate Program in Professional Writing and the Master of Arts in Rhetoric and Composition at UCF. As a UCF online course, LIN 5675 comprises three component areas: a public course web site, a password-protected database of student biographies and photos, and a password-protected account within WebCT (UCF's course management system).

Portrayal

It is nearly 10:30pm on a Wednesday night the week before Halloween. Three women sit in front of computer screens in three different homes, sharing the experience of working together as they grapple with nominal clauses, gerund phrases, and the like. "Dominique" and "Alice" were "talking" in the chat room for a half hour as they got organized. "Carmen" was a little late due to picking up her husband after the family van broke down. After a few minutes of commiserating while the prep work was finished, the conversation has taken a decidedly focused and "grammatical" turn:

"DOMINIQUE">>1 down 7 to go ;)

"DOMINIQUE">>yes!

"ALICE">>let's go

"DOMINIQUE">>oh huh

"DOMINIQUE">>I don't know that either of the first two work

"ALICE">>I think that all work, except for the third one

"CARMEN">>I think we should ditch the one about what prompted tracy singing. The gerund is not the subject

"DOMINIQUE">>it's a gerund as a subject

"DOMINIQUE">>yea

"DOMINIQUE">>but then is the candice flying the subject either?

"ALICE">>I think that #2 works

"DOMINIQUE">>ok

"CARMEN">>I did not keep that one about Candice either

These three women are a part of a four-member team known as "The Nouns" within a graduate-level "English Grammar and Usage" course. (They *were* a five-member team for almost a month until "Katerina" withdrew from the class.) "Betty," the last member has a few days left on her vacation, but she submitted her work ahead of time so that her group wouldn't be inconvenienced. The team's current task is to complete "Part II" (of a three-part assignment) due by midnight. As the teamwork continues, "Carmen" finds it difficult to follow the exchange and suggests that the other two members finalize the submission, and then she'll review it before the final version is posted to the class discussion board.

"Carmen" is a self-proclaimed "grammar phobic," which is not that uncommon in this course. Even some of the students who earn a living as writers and editors admit to a degree of trepidation over the subject matter. The students all have each other to depend upon, though. LIN 5675 makes *extensive* use of group work. Very few of the course's assignments involve work that can be completed without the assistance of others. As the students read on the course web site:

[K]eep in mind that a significant portion of your course grade will be determined

by collaborative work. Whether you want to or not, you will have to learn how to

collaborate with others to succeed in this class. In the "real world," you won't

have any choice either.

Indeed, as the web site also points out, team-based assignments account for 25% of each

student's final grade. In fact, the course web site points out many things.

The publicly-accessible course web site for LIN 5675 contains nine distinct pages,

each with its own prominent button on the site's control panel (with titles like, Overview,

Collaboration, Protocols, Policies, etc.) in addition to a few buttons that link to other web

sites. All the LIN 5675 course web pages have a distinct appearance. They all have a

background that looks a bit like the off-white pages of a much-loved book, accented with

graphical elements set off in red. Each page also has a "logo" containing the course title,

a cartoon figure peering out through a set of binoculars from behind some shrubbery, and

one of those sentence diagrams that many of us remember from junior high school

English class. (See Figure 9.) This web site is primarily for would-be students to visit

prior to their enrollment in LIN 5675, but it is also consulted by registered students as the

authoritative source for certain matters of policy and procedure. There are mundane

pieces of information such as how to contact the instructor and how to log in to the

course, but there are other, more intriguing features, such as the Pretest that invites

students to see if they are ready to take this course. Pretest-takers are confronted with

questions such as "Which word or group of words in the following sentence is an object

complement?" and "Which of the following sentences contains an unclear pronoun?" The

feedback given to those who get less than 10 of the 15 questions correct includes the following measured response,

Not bad. You can earn a good grade in this course, but only if you work hard. Consider using one of the following supplementary texts (the bookstore can order them for you)….

This professional tone with a slight tinge of humor is the voice in which all the course web pages are written. It is Dr. Young's. Other examples include:

[Y]ou'll be expected to complete several (some students would say "numerous") assignments every week, and you'll be encouraged to complete additional practice exercises on your own.

and

If one member of your team continually causes problems and your team can't stand it anymore, you can vote that member out of your team. Here's how…

Once students have registered for the course, they are asked to complete a Student Information Form also located on the course web site. The form prompts students for their contact information, their computer platform, and the reasons for taking this course. Dr. Young uses this information to send detailed follow-up information about the course to her new students.
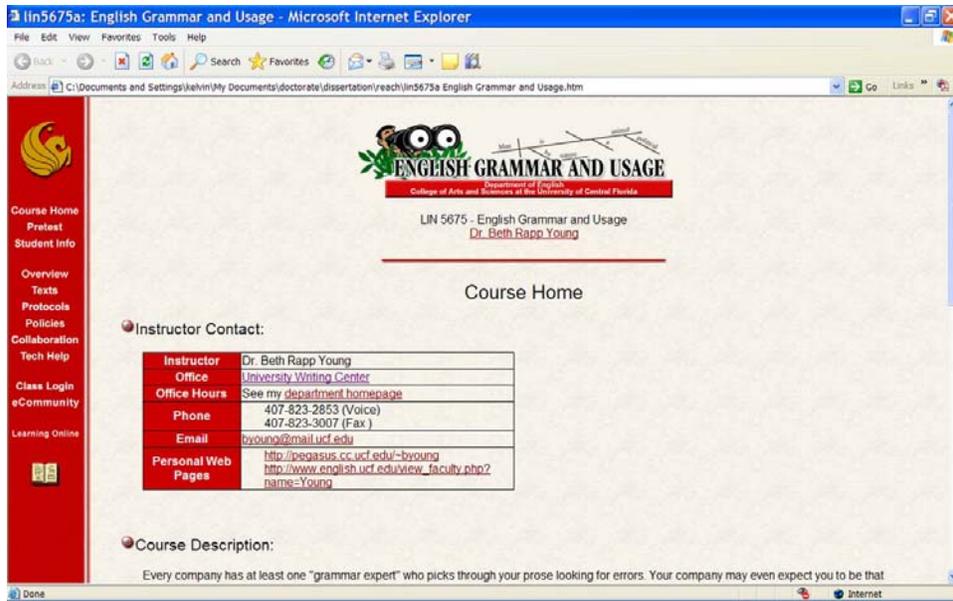
Figure 1. LIN 5675 Web Site

Now, a week before Halloween, "Carmen" and her classmates are in their ninth week of LIN 5675. They are five days past UCF's formal withdrawal deadline. Prior to the deadline, five of their number elected to leave the class for various reasons. Twelve remain. More than midway through the 16-week term, these students have become well acquainted with each other. They are familiar with the weekly rhythm of the Monday, Wednesday, and Friday due dates. Each of them is comfortable navigating the areas within their password-protected WebCT account where their course "happens." Initially, their comfort level was facilitated by the visual resemblance of their WebCT account to the course web site. (See Figure 10.) Most helpful was the admonition by Dr. Young to "click… on the different buttons to see what they do." While the 12 students do much of their course work in three teams, they also interact as a whole class with their instructor. Both forms of interaction are predominantly in the form of asynchronous discussion postings within WebCT.
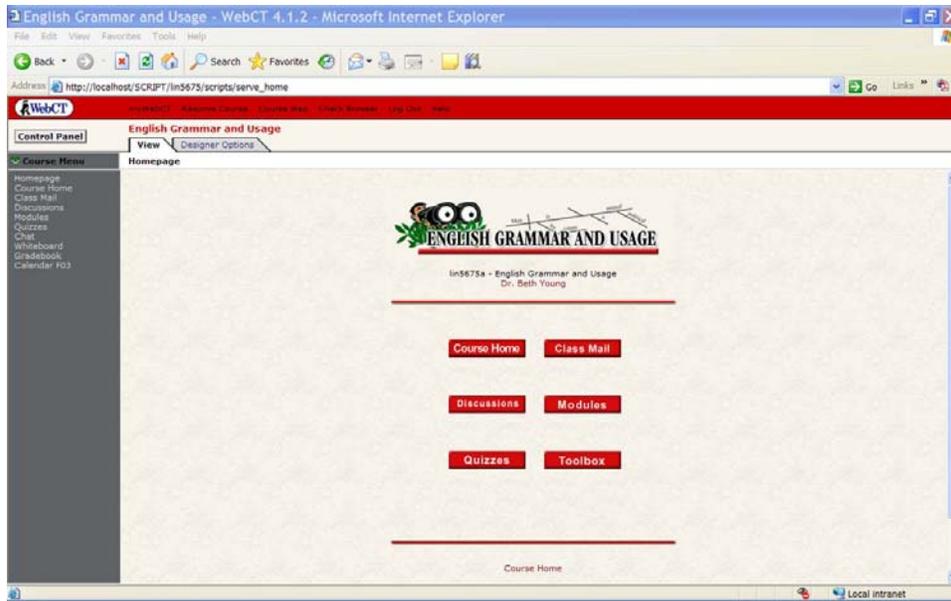
Figure 2. LIN 5675 WebCT Account

During the fall term of 2003, there are 18 separate discussion areas (or "topics")
available to the 12 students in LIN 5675. (See Figure 11). One discussion topic is
"private" and only available to each group's members. Most of the remaining topics are
for specific assignments involving required discussions. Two of the topics meet other
needs. "Main" is used primarily by Dr. Young to post announcements of a general nature,
while "Help!" receives postings from students who need assistance with various aspects
of the course (i.e., technical problems, procedural questions, and course content
clarifications). By the end of the semester, these 12 students and their instructor (plus
their five former classmates) will have posted 1614 messages. The 12 students who
complete the course will be responsible for posting 1332 messages (an average of 111
posts per student), while the instructor will ultimately make 163 postings (over 10% of
the total messages).

Discussions

| Compose message | | Search | Topic settings |

Click on a topic name to see its messages.

Topic	Unread	Total	Status
SenDraw	0	23	public, unlocked
Perceived Grammaticality	0	67	public, unlocked
Grammar Instruction	0	79	public, unlocked
Gender	0	80	public, unlocked
Passive Voice	0	35	public, unlocked
E-Prime	0	63	public, unlocked
Make-Believe Grammar	0	18	public, unlocked
New Words	0	44	public, unlocked
Phenomenology	0	34	public, unlocked
Grammar Cops	0	47	public, unlocked
Word Guess	0	47	public, unlocked
Expert Style	0	44	public, unlocked
Spelling Reform	0	63	public, unlocked
Punctuation	0	12	public, unlocked
Improving Your Writing/Teaching	0	30	public, unlocked
The Nouns	0	242	private, unlocked
The Pronouns	0	64	private, locked
The Verbs	0	144	private, unlocked
The Adverbs	0	351	private, unlocked
The Adjectives	0	1	private, locked
Help!	0	51	public, unlocked
Main	0	75	public, unlocked
Notes	0	0	public, unlocked
All	**0**	**1614**	---

Figure 3. LIN 5675 Discussion Topics

"Carmen" is a prolific post-er. She is in the habit of responding substantively to postings from her classmates and always has an encouraging word for them. (In the final discussion assignment of the term she will respond thoughtfully to postings from every student in the class. She is the only student to respond to these messages.) She also makes substantive original assignment postings. By the end of the course, she will have posted more than any other student (i.e., 256 messages). Although Dr. Young has said that, "I expect you to read as many discussion messages as necessary to do a good job on each assignment," "Carmen" makes it a point to read as many messages as she can. She is also

determined to log in regularly to the WebCT account as Dr. Young suggested on the Protocols page of the course web site. This high level of activity doesn't translate clearly into consistently high achievement, however. For most of the graded components of the course, "Carmen" will fall in the lower 50% of the course. Despite this, however, she will end the course with the fifth highest grade in the class. Another classmate, "Janice" from the "Adverbs" team, also has a high level of activity (only slightly less than "Carmen"). She also makes it a point to stay engaged with her classmates from a personal or social perspective. For instance, amid a content-focused posting, she interjects the following phrases, "Great suggestions!... "Margarita," thanks for the info on subject/subject complements… I really appreciate everyone's input." Just a few minutes later she adds a follow-up posting to clarify her appreciation and to give everyone their "due":

> I meant to say thanks to "Sheri" for the sub/sub.comp.
>
> info and to "Margarita" for the "that" and "which" stuff.

"Janice" will continue to have consistently high achievement throughout the graded components of the course, and she will end the course with the third highest grade in the class. By contrast, "George," from the "Verbs" team, has a low level of activity. Although he posts substantively and "carries his weight" on his team, he has the lowest number of discussion posts and the second lowest number of postings read in the class. He provides little in the way of "extra" communication on a personal level. Nevertheless, "George" achieves consistently. Only in the team-based assignments do his grades dip slightly. However, at the end of the course he will have the second highest grade in the class.

At the moment, though, "Carmen," "Janice," "George," and the other nine students in LIN 5675 are focused on completing "Part II" of their "Team Inventing Sentences" assignment. After nine weeks of the course, the students have completed more than 10 multi-part assignments. The details of these and other assignments are divided between the Course Calendar (See Figure 12.), the Modules (See Figure 13.), and, to a lesser extent, the Quizzes (See Figure 14.). The LIN 5675 students have become used to coordinating these different sources of information. As complex as this task is, however, their instructor facilitates the process by providing consistent and occasionally repetitive messages throughout the course materials while maintaining one authoritative source for each type of information. For instance, the Course Calendar provides Due Dates, Assignments, and Descriptions for the entire term on one page. In some cases, the Course Calendar refers students to other areas:

See Modules for more information about this assignment; complete Part I ONLY for today….

See the Quizzes page for more information on when this quiz is available. Quizzes and tests can be taken on any day or time they are available without penalty, even if the quiz is available a different day than listed in the calendar.

The Modules and the Quizzes vary, though, in the type of authoritative information they supply to students. Quizzes provide detailed time-sensitive information beyond what is contained in the Calendar, while the Modules contain details on procedures for completing assignments for which the Calendar provides timeframes. There is one module for every week and one or more weekly quizzes or tests. While all but one of the quizzes and tests are required (and are, therefore, graded), there are some module

components that are optional (not graded). Many of these optional elements are readings

from various web sites, while others are interactive multimedia components. One set of

optional assignments was experienced by "Carmen" and her classmates during Week 1 of

LIN 5675. Labeled "First Day Activities," these assignments are recommended by Dr.

Young because

> Completing the activities will introduce you to your classmates, provide some
>
> basic technical information about the course, and help "smoke out" any technical
>
> problems that might keep you from doing future assignments.

Included among these activities is a suggestion for students to "Update E-Community

[sic] Information." While students had provided some of this information via the Student

Information Form, they are reminded that "everyone in the class can see the E-

Community [sic], but the Student Information Form is sent only to your teacher." (See

Figure 15.)

Figure 4. LIN 5675 Course Calendar
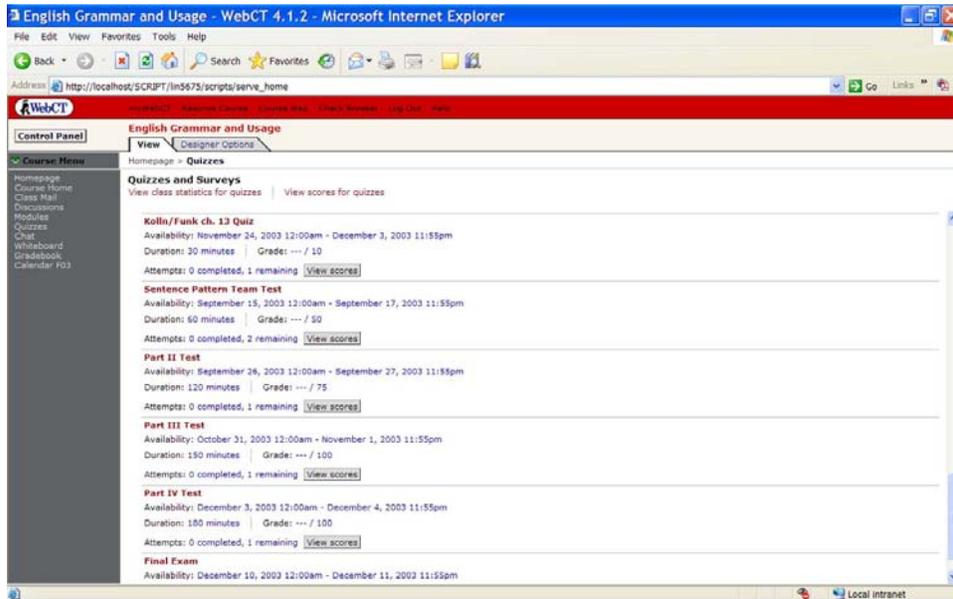
Figure 5. LIN 5675 Modules Page

Figure 6. LIN 5675 Quizzes Page
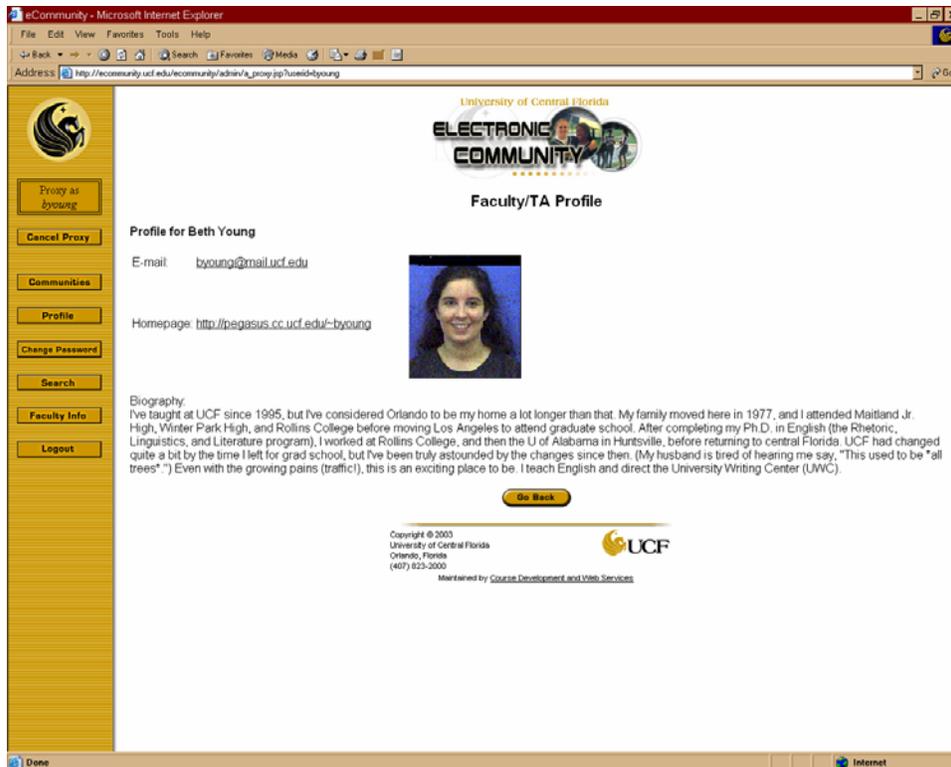
Figure 7. Sample eCommunity Profile

As "Carmen's" group finalizes their submission of "Team Inventing Sentences II" late on October 22, 2003 it is unlikely that "Carmen" anticipates the holistic remarks she will make at the conclusion of the course in a summary posting:

> I felt that by taking this course I had essentially set myself up for failure—and several times during the course my doubt and expectations of failure almost became a self-fulfilling prophecy…. However, there were four key points from this course that resulted in significant paradigm shifts for me that I think will help me to improve my writing and my teaching of writing…. These principles, recommendations, and distinctions have helped me to understand how to make word and punctuation choices—and how to teach students to do the same…

Perhaps she would also be surprised to discover the personal course mail Dr. Young will send her later in which she praises "Carmen:"

> I really appreciate all your hard work this semester. You definitely went above and beyond the bare minimum. I hope you are proud of what you have accomplished, because you definitely have accomplished a lot!

Methodological Side Note

LIN 5675 was represented in this study by materials archived at the end of a 16-week term from within the three constituent areas listed above (i.e., course web site, database of student photographs and biographies, and WebCT). The age of this course iteration commends it for review using a model designed for case study of archival materials. Employing ethnographic procedures, including the maintenance of a research journal and a series of comprehensive field notes with embedded analytic notes, I recorded observations, noted emergent themes, and documented methodological rationales for more than 30 hours as I iteratively examined each course component in detail (with the exception of course mail messages initiated by students). Taken as a whole, these individual sets of notes are both process and product. That is, writing them enabled me to conceptualize the course as a whole and to surface elements of particular interest for further study while the existence of these notes served as documentation of the contextual, methodological, analytic, and personal response data that Rodgers and Cowles (1993) call for in qualitative research studies. This research methodology is the basis for both the thick description in the portrayal above and the analysis underlying the appraisal below. Although reliability is a moot point in case study research (Janesick,

2000), I initially employed three validity procedures (Creswell and Miller, 2000) to ensure credibility in this study: triangulation, member checking (see instructor response below), and audit trail. Unfortunately, the audit trail of systematic documentation was corrupted due to a computer malfunction, so I can now only claim two validity procedures. (However, as noted above, the process of creating this documentation played an invaluable role in my analysis.)

Online course criticisms are based on connoisseurship of online courses and, online course critics are expected to document this expertise. I have worked within UCF's online learning initiative for the past seven years, leading faculty development courses, advising faculty in course design, and consulting for other institutions. As an instructional designer, I assisted Dr. Young in the initial design of LIN 5675 in 1999, more than four years prior to the particular iteration featured in this criticism.

Appraisal

Following Eisner (1985, 1991), this appraisal will consist of interpretive comments about the online course iteration described above, remarks about the educational value of aspects of this course, and themes that emerged during the study with implications for other online course settings. After the appraisal, a written response to this criticism by Dr. Young, the instructor of LIN 5675, will be included before my conclusion.

Interpretation

Four interpretive perspectives (McCutcheon, 1978 and 1981) addressing three of

Schwab's (1973) educational commonplaces (i.e., students, teachers, and milieus or

learning environment) guide my interpretation of this online course: the Spectrum of

Teaching Styles (Mosston and Ashworth, 1990), the Community of Inquiry Model

(Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000), learning environment facets (Perkins, 1991),

and modular reusability. The Spectrum of Teaching Styles draws a distinction between

the extremes of teacher-direction and student-direction while emphasizing the goals of

knowledge reproduction and knowledge production, respectively. The Community of

Inquiry Model presents the intersection of social presence, teaching presence, and

cognitive presence. The learning environment facets are information banks, symbol pads,

task managers, construction kits and phenomenaria. Modular reusability differentiates

multiple layers of the instructional environment and identifies the dichotomy between

contextualization and reusability of instructional materials at each of these environmental

levels. All four of these lenses will be brought to bear on this course simultaneously.

This course evidences extensive use of modular reusability. At the systems level,

WebCT and eCommunity are enterprise applications that expedite the development of

online courses through (re)use by multiple faculty. At the course web site and Module

level, the decontextualization of time-sensitive content allows reuse of these materials in

this course (and possibly in similar courses) from semester to semester with little

modification needed. Within individual modules, Dr. Young has chosen to incorporate

various multimedia components that are reusable in other grammar courses. Dr. Young

notes in a discussion posting that when a given situation arises in LIN 5675, "I even have

a standard…response at the ready. And I don't need to post that standard response [this time]!" This indicates mindfulness of the utility of "stock" instructor discussion postings which may be reused from semester to semester in this course. I noted at least twelve instructor discussion postings that either have been or could be reused in this way.

Through her implementation of WebCT and eCommunity, Dr. Young makes available to students various standard tools (e.g., picture selection, discussions, and chat) for expressing themselves through symbolic communications (symbol pads). In addition to these standard system tools, she provides a custom software application (SenDraw) that students may use to create and share sentence diagrams when called for by assignments. (See Figure 16.)
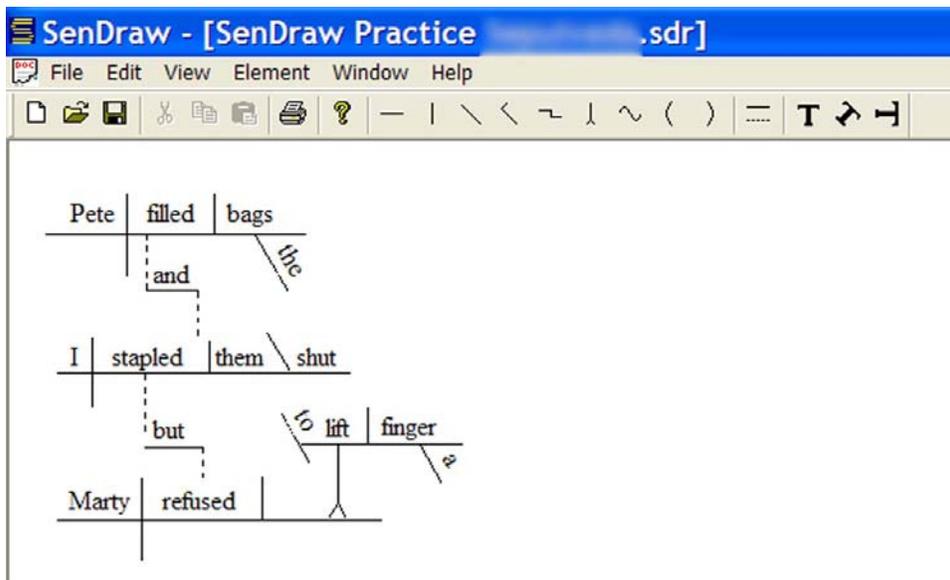

Figure 8. SenDraw Example.

Indirectly, through her development of course web pages, Module pages, and the Course Calendar, Dr. Young serves as an authoritative source of information for students (information bank) while structuring the instructional context (teaching presence) and providing guidance to students in when and how to complete activities (task manager) as

a means of facilitating interaction between students and content (cognitive presence). A particularly elegant example of facilitating cognitive presence from the Modules is found in Week 10:

> Identify the point that Williams uses his special technique to make. (When you have read the entire article, you will know what that technique is.)

Another two examples are found in the structuring of the discussion topics themselves. The Punctuation discussion has relatively few postings because these few are team postings produced through a series of team interactions. The end product is a high concentration of cognitive presence. One of the last discussion topics to be used, "Improving Your Writing/Teaching" with its associated end-of-term reflection on what has been learned also reveals a concentrated cognitive presence.

In addition to her design of course materials, Dr. Young embodies the roles of information bank and teaching presence as she stimulates the critical thinking and personal meaning making of students (cognitive presence) through her substantive content discussion postings and personalized replies to student postings. Although she also exemplifies teaching presence in the Main and Help! discussion topics, she willingly shares this responsibility with the students who spontaneously provide guidance to their classmates. In fact, while the subject matter of her course seems inclined toward students' reproduction of existing knowledge, Dr. Young seems more personally predisposed to knowledge production and shared responsibility for student learning.

As demonstrated repeatedly in the portrayal above, within the course materials (i.e., course web site, Modules, and Calendar), Dr. Young's voice reflects a high degree of social presence. She routinely interjects humor and anecdotes to personalize the

materials. However, it is in the discussion postings of both instructor and students that the social presence of this instructional experience is most evident. Through numerous personal, humorous, and emotive comments (usually interspersed with postings that are primarily on-task and reflective of cognitive or teaching presence), the instructor and students of LIN 5675 present themselves to each other as "real people" through this text-based communications medium. (Excerpts from such discussions are provided in the portrayal above and in the evaluation section below.)

Finally, through the design and implementation of various multi-part assignments (e.g., the Team Inventing Sentences assignment featured in the portrayal above), Dr. Young facilitates (teaching presence) a high degree of interactivity in this course. These multi-part assignments often require students to create construction kits of knowledge "objects" which they then use in their team assignments. The following excerpts from parts 1-3 of the Team Inventing Sentences assignment provide a taste of this process:

Part I…create sentences that fulfill the requirements listed below…Post your work to your team discussion….Write a sentence in which a gerund phrase is the direct object in a nominal clause. Capitalize the gerund phrase and put the nominal clause in brackets, e.g., I know [that Joe enjoys SWIMMING]…. Part II…As a team choose the best 1-3 examples of each sentence, and choose someone to compile, format, and submit the answers on behalf of your team….Part III…Look in your team forum for the sentences created for this assignment by another team (to be posted by Dr. Young sometime today). Do the other team's sentences correctly fulfill the assignment?...If not, your team must correct the sentences. Add the corrected sentences and the words "Checked by

[Team Name]" to their list, and post it to your team forum, using the subject line:

"[Team Name's] Final Verified Sentences." It should be clear which sentences

you wrote and which sentences the original team wrote

The multi-part Grammar Voyeur activities, in particular, are also, arguably, a kind of

phenomenaria in that these assignments ask students to find grammar in its natural habitat

out in the "real world" and to interact with it according to the concepts being learned in

LIN 5675:

For this course, you'll be a "voyeur," peeking at other texts in order to figure out

their grammatical form and function. You'll collect "snapshots" (by cutting and

pasting text into a word processor) to turn in regularly. Internet browsers make it

easy to find the most enticing examples….Research indicates that grammar

instruction which focuses exclusively on grammar exercises doesn't transfer well

into reading/writing…Through Grammar Voyeur assignments, you'll apply what

you learn in class to your own reading and writing. In this way, not only will you

learn about grammar, you'll learn how grammar is used to communicate.

Seen through the lenses of the four interpretive perspectives introduced above

(i.e., the Community of Inquiry Model, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000; modular

reusability; learning environment facets, Perkins, 1991; and the Spectrum of Teaching

Styles, Mosston and Ashworth, 1990), LIN 5675 is revealed as a systematically

implemented, highly interactive experience that promotes student learning through a

complex array of coordinated activities. I'll summarize my interpretations through each

of the four lenses below.

The lens of the Community of Inquiry Model displays a large amount of teaching presence in LIN 5675. This is not surprising, given that, in my experience, students of online courses typically require more structured guidance in their instructional experience than students in face-to-face courses. However, when this teaching presence is presented in the course discussions, to some extent it is shared between instructor and students. There are also concentrated bursts of cognitive presence throughout the course, manifested in the assignments carried out in the discussion area. However, the teaching presence and cognitive presence in the course are seasoned with ample doses of social presence. The social presence of the instructor is primarily designed into the course, while the social presence of individual students arises from their own inclinations and from the facilitation offered by the course design.

Hodgins (2004a) observes that, in general, "courses" are typically low in overall reusability. Viewed through the lens of modular reusability, despite the fact that LIN 5675 is highly contextualized and therefore low in reusability as a whole, Dr. Young's course manifests a number of reusable elements as evidenced above. This emphasis on reusability minimizes the time required for maintenance between course offerings, mitigates the time requirements of course administration during a term, and facilitates the creation or updating of other courses.

The interpretive perspective of the learning environment facets presents a view of LIN 5675 that highlights the administrative role of task manager and the resource role of information bank played predominantly by the course materials. These two roles taken together mirror the emphasis on teaching presence noted above. Students are expected to express themselves symbolically through use of the symbol pads built into the course

management system and through other tools provided by the instructor. As Perkins (1991) notes, these three facets are expected to appear in any learning environment. In addition, as shown above, a number of Dr. Young's assignments exhibit characteristics of the construction kits and phenomenaria that Perkins indicates are indicative of a constructivist orientation in which students' construction of knowledge is emphasized over reproduction of received knowledge.

The final lens of the Spectrum of Teaching Styles reveals that control of student learning in LIN 5675 is balanced delicately between the instructor and the students themselves. As shown above, the instructor's display of teaching presence and her functions of task manager and information bank evidence a clear authoritative role for Dr. Young. However, through her expectation of active student participation in assignments with a constructivist orientation and her encouragement of student involvement in the Main and Help! discussions (shared teaching presence), Dr. Young balances her authoritativeness against what seems to be a desire for students to take responsibility for their own learning. This emphasis is consistent with the balance also held between the reproduction of existing knowledge and the creation or discovery of new knowledge.

Evaluation

As a result of these interpretations, I offer the following comments on the educational value of this course. In addition to my own experience with online courses, Eisner's (1991) view of educative experiences as those which "foster the growth of human intelligence, nurture curiosity, and yield satisfaction in the doing of those things worth doing" (p. 99) guides my comments.

Dr. Young *humanizes* the instructional materials and the instructor interactions of LIN 5675 through interjection of her voice (professional, yet humorous):

> When Dr. Young did these assignments herself, she noticed that she had a certain tendency to get very interested in the web pages she was reading…. pretty soon you know the definition of "elutriate" and "foudroyant" and "melliforous" but you still don't know what you went to the dictionary to look up. (And please don't ask how long it took to find those examples of interesting words!)…You may not lose yourself in web surfing, but for normal people, this tip works!

Within discussion postings, how disarming it must be for students to "hear" their grammar teacher say things like

> By now, y'all have started reading chapter two. The information in this chapter is new to all of you, probably. Hooray! Isn't that great--now you know that you really will learn something new from this course! Some of you are worried because the material is so unfamiliar. I am VERY confident that you will learn it.

And how reassuring it must be for this statement to be followed by practical tips that have worked for students in the past.

In LIN 5675, high expectations are made of students, and sophisticated coordination between multiple task manager sources is required of them as they pursue learning. Some students may not be up to the challenge, however. Although Dr. Young's clear pre-enrollment information on the course web site and consistent communications during the early days (drop/add period) of the course afford every opportunity for students to make an informed decision about whether to rise to her course's expectations or not, multiple deadlines per week involving various types of individual work (e.g.,

readings, quizzes, web searches, etc.), collaborative work with team mates, and group

communications in addition to the challenging subject matter may be more than some

graduate students are prepared to accept in an elective course. (In fact, five of the original

17 students in this course withdrew, although their withdrawal may not have been due to

the course workload.) This level of sophistication in instructional tasks is consistent with

a constructivist orientation to learning in that students engage in complex tasks in order to

facilitate higher levels of learning. Wilson's (1996a) definition of a constructivist

learning environment as "a place where learners may work together and support each

other as they use a variety of tools and information resources in their guided pursuit of

learning goals and problem-solving activities" (p. 5) could easily be a description of LIN

5675.

At the same time, despite Dr. Young's systematic approach to course

administration, the facilitation of such a complex environment is time consuming. As an

example, Dr. Young is particularly skilled at providing repetition of a unified message

throughout her instructional materials and her communications with students while

maintaining one authoritative source. A minor technical concern (with instructor

workload implications) arises when she incorporates multiple files with similar content at

various places in the course (e.g., in Week 4 and Week 7). When updates have to be

made, each file location must be remembered and modified accordingly. It is unlikely

that instructors without a constructivist value orientation would undertake such a

challenge.

What the LIN 5675 course web site refers to as "collaboration" is obviously more

than an instructional strategy. Its prominence in this course, as cited throughout this

criticism, indicates that the valuing of student interaction leading to collaboration (and perhaps independence?) is a part of the core curriculum of LIN 5675. As such, it is assessed in various ways throughout the course. However, perhaps there should be *more* alignment between students' collaborative work and student grades. Currently, team-based assignments account for 25% of the final grade. As in the case of "George" in the portrayal above, however, it is still possible to do the bare minimum interaction and excel. Alternatively, perhaps there is an *over*-emphasis on collaboration in this course in that there are currently no demonstrable gains for students who are highly interactive. Nevertheless, collaboration *is* integrated into this course to such a degree that perhaps there are unseen social learning gains that could be assessed and made evident.

Themes

Based on a close examination of the course materials from this fall 2003 course iteration as portrayed and discussed above, I offer the following themes for consideration as propositions:

- Clear and consistent communication of expectations for students runs throughout course materials and instructor communications.

- Multi-part assignments (with multiple due dates) facilitate high student-student interaction.

- Course materials and instructor communications incorporate the instructor's "voice" as a humanizing element in online courses.

- The instructor-as-human embodies aspects of the curriculum as realized in the instructor's personal values.

- Instructor values, curriculum, assessment, and grading are aligned.

- The practice of being authoritative without being authoritarian leads both to clear

  student expectations and opportunities for student-instructor interdependence.

Response by Instructor

The full text of Dr. Beth Young's instructor response follows below as a single-

spaced block quote:

> While it's always interesting to hear a different perspective on one's courses,
> what I particularly appreciate about this analysis was that it supports my teaching
> goals for this course.
>
> I consciously worked towards three goals as I was designing LIN 5675:
>
> 1. I wanted to use the technology efficiently for course management, freeing me
> to adopt a "coach" role while the semester was underway.
>
> I'd much rather spend my time helping students learn the course content than
> distributing materials or even assigning grades, as I suspect most faculty would.
> The efforts toward communicating clear expectations, and the modular re-
> usability of course elements, enable me to focus more energy on answering
> questions, participating in discussions, and other types of "social presence."
>
> In fact, major changes I have made in the course all relate to this goal. This fall
> 2003 course was the first time I put calendar information into a single webpage,
> because updating the WebCT Calendar tool had become too labor-intensive.
> Since fall 2003, I have moved the information in "Modules" out of its weekly
> organization (separate modules for week one, week two, etc.) and onto a single
> page for the same reason. This change also eliminated the technical concern
> mentioned earlier of needing to update duplicate pages. And when I find myself
> repeating discussion messages from semester to semester, I try to find a way to
> work that information into the Modules.
>
> 2. I wanted to encourage helpful learning behaviors while still grading on mastery
> of course content.
>
> I find that many of my students have not formally studied grammar since they
> were in middle school. Even for students who remember what they learned in
> middle school, the grammar in this class is more challenging. Still, many students

often assume that because material looks familiar (e.g., they recognize terms such as "noun" and "clause"), they have studied sufficiently, even though they cannot apply the material to new passages.

The different assignments in the class are intended to give students a better test than the "looks familiar" test to assess their own knowledge, helping them know when they need to study more, and to engage students in behaviors that will facilitate their learning the material. For example, the Grammar Voyeur assignments require students to apply what they are learning to "real-life" texts by having them find examples of particular structures and assess whether their examples are correct. By completing these projects in groups, students gain more material with which to practice, an audience to whom concepts must be explained, and additional people of whom questions can be asked.

All of this, I believe, helps most students learn the material. However, engaging in these collaborative behaviors cannot substitute for learning. Because the course grade is based on content mastery rather than learning behaviors, it's possible that students can engage in these behaviors and not get a good grade (as "Carmen" did), or they can get a good grade without engaging in these behaviors (as "George" did). I don't see this as a weakness in the course.

However, this second goal often conflicts with the first, because all these smaller assignments make the course more complex. I would love to reduce the complexity, but I haven't figured out how to do that without sacrificing student interaction with each other and with the material.

3. I wanted to make good use of the Internet environment, drawing on the online resources and tools rather than simply translating face-to-face activities to an online medium.

Here, I am helped by the fact that linguistics is a social science. Not only does the Internet provide a rich source of appropriate data, but computers are wonderful tools for compiling student-generated data. The constructivist approach noted in this analysis, I think, arises from assignments that require students to act like social scientists, gathering data and drawing conclusions based on evidence.

Often when I teach this class, students contribute related material that they have discovered on their own. For example, one year a student mentioned a National Public Radio (NPR) story about linguistic research suggesting that the word "like" as used by teenagers ("And I was, like, really happy that . . .") was not "empty language" but rather carried important features of meaning. Other students responded with accounts of their own experiences and related links they had found online. The Internet environment is particularly helpful for these student-generated discussions because it is so easy to draw in additional materials.

During fall 2003, unfortunately, students did not spontaneously contribute material to the course. I'm not sure why they didn't, and the analysis doesn't give many clues either.

Overall, this analysis helpfully illuminates what the course does that works. The analysis seems less useful for explaining what the course doesn't do or what hasn't worked. However, if more analyses like this one were available, it would be possible to compare different courses. I know I would find such a comparison very useful. Even without comparing different courses, this analysis helps me understand what worked in LIN 5675 during fall 2003 and why, so I appreciate the opportunity to have the course examined here. (Personal communication from B. Young, July 25, 2005.)

Conclusion

In this online course criticism of the UCF graduate course "English Grammar and Usage," I portrayed the instructional experience of the course as it was offered in fall term 2003. I documented the methodology for the case study underlying this criticism based on my experience with online learning. I also provided interpretation, evaluative comments, and emergent themes from the study. In response to this criticism, the instructor of LIN 5675 presented her written reaction.

Readers should bear in mind that, despite the guidance of the four interpretive perspectives and the rigorous methodology underlying this criticism, the perspective presented here relies to a great degree on my perceptions as an online course connoisseur. Because of this, some readers may have lingering concerns with the credibility of this account. To offset these concerns, I will close with some reflective comments on the process of conducting this online course criticism.

As I studied LIN 5675, a guiding question that I kept before me was, "What was it like to experience this course offering? Throughout the iterative series of fieldnotes, memos, and journal entries based on my "observations" of the course materials, I was

ever mindful of the four interpretive perspectives summarized above. Student names were converted to numbers to more easily recognize patterns and in order to minimize any influence of student names. In brief, the observations followed this sequence: (1) observations of the three broad component areas (i.e., public web site, eCommunity, and WebCT); (2) summary records in WebCT (e.g., discussion summary, student tracking, grades, etc.); (3) all instructor discussion postings; (4) all discussion postings of several students of interest; (5) all course content (starting with the Course Calendar); (6) all discussion postings within the team discussions of each student of interest; (7) instructor course e-mail messages (outgoing messages only). In addition to the iterative versions of documents based on these observations, I also created a timeline spreadsheet based on the Course Calendar and the timestamps of various WebCT records (e.g., assignment due dates, first course access, last course access, chat sessions, key discussion postings, etc.). Timestamps were converted to a format (i.e., year, month, day, hour, minute) that could be easily sorted.

As I reflect back on this process, I recall identifying the high interactivity of the student called "Carmen" in the portrayal above and *assuming* that she would have high performance as well. This led to a comparison of interactivity ratings and performance ratings (i.e., component and overall grades converted to percentages and rank ordered). The students identified above as "George" and "Janice" surfaced from this comparison as students of interest (i.e., high performance/low interactivity and high performance/high interactivity respectively) along with "Carmen." I "followed" these students throughout their discussion postings, chat sessions, and graded assignments in order to gain insight into the whole instructional experience through their eyes as they interacted with their

teams, the whole class, and the instructor. As I proceeded, I noted any questions that

surfaced so that I could follow-up with additional observation/note-taking.

In writing the portrayal above, I endeavored to construct a narrative that would tie

together the insights gained from the case study process and that would represent as

richly and neutrally as possible the instructional experience of the fall 2003 offering of

LIN 5675. The appraisal that follows the portrayal was based in the case study process

and in my own perceptions as an online course connoisseur. Based on the themes

presented in this criticism, readers may choose to look for similarities and contrasts

within other instructional contexts.