Article

Seeking to Reduce Physical Distancing Using Socratic Dialogue in Teacher Feedback

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Abstract

The paper reports on how I sought to develop and maintain a positive rapport with my students during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis conducting emergency remote teaching (ERT). Due to the transition from face-to-face classroom interaction to online teaching and learning, and the subsequent physical distancing, opportunities to develop close relations with students were reduced. One strategy to deal with this problem that I explored was to change the way I provided written feedback to students. I noticed that my feedback prior to the crisis, using the review tool in Word, tended to maintain an authoritative voice using imperatives such as 'change to …'; 'look at …'. I sought to move away from this voice by employing Walker's (2004) DISCOUNT coding system, which presents different communicative moves drawing on Socratic dialogue. I complemented this coding system using modal verbs such as 'may' and 'should' rather than imperatives to further increase dialogism (Kress & Hodge, 1979, p. 122; Fairclough, 2001, p. 105). It was surmised that this strategy for providing feedback might help to reduce the affective barriers constructed by the physical distance enforced during the crisis. Students' comments about the feedback structure are shared demonstrating that this strategy is correlated with a supportive and caring approach. Additionally, it was observed that some students also engaged in similar dialogic communication when sending redrafts back. Consequently, it is concluded that the strategy aided in building rapport with students during emergency remote teaching (ERT), but it is too early to hypothesise to what extent it played a role. The next step in the research, as I continue to teach entirely online in the coming semester, is to interview students to ask their views on the use of Socratic dialogue and hedging in text-based communication, and its relationship to building tutor-student rapport.

Keywords

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1 Statement of the Teaching Context

The academic writing programme that the module depicted in this paper belongs to is entitled the Ideas and Expository Programme (I&E). It has been running for approximately 10 years in the residential colleges of the University Town campus at the National University of Singapore. All modules belong to what is often referred to as Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL). As Coyle highlights in the Marsh Report CLIL/EMILE The European Dimension: Action, Trends and Foresight Potential (2002), CLIL aims to 'safeguard the subject being taught whilst promoting language as a medium for learning as well as an objective of the learning process itself' (Coyle in Marsh, 2002, p. 37). Thus, language is viewed as a subject to be learned; it is also the medium through which disciplinary subject matter is taught. There are two levels of courses on the Ideas and Expository Programme (I&E). The research from teaching the module depicted in this article pertains to the second level. These second level modules seek to confer to second year college residents some of the basic core strategies representing successful scholarly research. Through a specific topic focus, students are provided an opportunity to learn and apply five core strategies that underlie successful scholarly research and writing. These are (i) critically evaluating academic literature; (ii) identifying how theory and method relate to knowledge production; (iii) relating effective research questions and/or hypotheses to multiple sources; (iv) practising drafting; and (v) reviewing a thesis, method, empirical evidence, and argumentation. There are typically 15 male and female second year undergraduate students from multiple disciplines. Classes are held twice a week for approximately 1hour 40 minutes each session.

The module depicted here, which I teach, is Sport and Socialisation. It explores processes that, through involvement in sport, teach knowledge and reinforce values and norms that are essential to participate in social life (Beedie & Craig, 2010). The module is designed to give students opportunities to produce research-based writing on a topic related to sport socialisation that they find interesting. Topics are highly diverse. For example, students might want to explore socialisation out of sport due to the lack of prosthetic technology for amputee athletes; how the child gymnasts in mainland China are socialised into leaving their homes in the hope of attaining a gold medal in the Olympics; or how masculinity is portrayed in well-known wushu films such as those starring Bruce Lee or Jet Li. There are three assignments for assessment purposes that form a process of knowledge building. The first is a written piece, an annotated bibliography. Students should have an idea about a question to be asked or a hypothesis to be tested at this stage to demonstrate that they have a solid grounding for a research paper, and potential for opening realms for new knowledge production. The second is a research proposal presentation during which students show how their reading has progressed to consider a theory and method for a sound research design before going into the field to collect data. The third is the research paper proper of approximately 2000 words with data collection and analysis completed, and conclusions drawn. The research reported in this paper, focuses on the tutor feedback provided to students at the assignment 3 drafting stage.

In previous semesters before the COVID-19 global crisis, contact with students occurred, often spontaneously, face-to-face during class time. It was possible to reserve time in each class for students to share with each other and with me how their projects were developing, and to clarify any doubts or receive input spontaneously. With the COVID-19 pandemic, this type of interaction could not be facilitated as my colleagues and I were asked to conduct emergency remote teaching (ERT), defined as 'a temporary shift of instructional delivery to an alternate delivery mode due to crisis circumstances' (Hodges et al., 2020). We were asked to quickly provide instructional supports through online means. One of my aims during the period was to promote dialogue with my students through the text-based communication (Garrison et al., 1999) that we would regularly have. One strategy I trialled to do this was to make my feedback more dialogic, or open to interpretation by employing Walker's (2004) DISCOUNT coding system, a form of Socratic dialogue with different communicative moves. I also combined the coding system with the use of modal verbs such as 'may' and 'should' for hedging rather than using imperatives, to avoid an authoritative voice (Kress & Hodge, 1979, p. 122; Fairclough, 2001, p. 105).

2 Rationale for the Practice

Moore and Kearsley (2012) identify emotional distance or difficulty in expressing personal feelings such as interest, doubt or worry as characteristics related to online text-based educational environments. Research has demonstrated that teachers are less able to resolve student problems quickly in the online environment (Hara & King, 2000; Thorpe, 2002). Moreover, students have been reported to feel isolation and anonymity online (Sharma & Maleyeff, 2003). Additionally, it is commonly considered that students in South East Asian cultures tend to view their teacher as an authoritative figure (Lee et al. 2009). Moore and Kearsley (2012) relate this to cultural distance in online learning environments. The student-teacher relationship might be amplified with physical distancing as cultural barriers to communication are difficult to change without physical contact. I was concerned that students might not feel that they are able to react in a critical way by initiating dialogues or questioning points I made in their feedback if I maintained an authoritarian voice. Employing Walker's (2004) DISCOUNT coding system, a form of Socratic dialogue and modal verbs such as 'may' and 'should' for hedging might help to reduce both cultural and emotional distance.

The Socratic method is sometimes referred to as 'teaching by questioning'. Socratic dialogue as tutor feedback in text-based communication has evolved as a strategy for applying certain types of questions to a student text, such as clarification and probing questions (Yang, Newby, & Bill, 2005). By embedding a variety of moves in students' texts, teachers can guide students to think about what they write and consider alternatives. Using this questioning form of communication is reported to have a positive impact on teacher-student relations (Wubbels, Brekelmans, den Brok, and Tartwijk, 2006). Socratic dialogue has been developed in distance education through Holmberg's 'Theory and Practice of Distance Education' (1989), Laurillard's Conversational Model (1993) and by Ros, Solé and Truman (2005) for giving feedback. The DISCOUNT scheme below is a coding system, first developed by Pilkington (1997, 2015), and then expanded by Walker (2004). It provides a typology of different moves that a tutor may use when engaged in giving feedback to promote interpersonal relations between teachers and students involved in text-based communication. It was selected primarily because Walker (2004) states that her coding system was developed to 'bridge the gap' between oral and written discourse' (p. 172). Thus, it might help to close the distance heightened during emergency remote teaching (ERT).

Table 1

Walker's (2004) DISCOUNT Coding System

Move	Description
Instruct	Provide information that constitutes a teaching point
Probe	Ask a question to elicit more information about a fact or opinion
Challenge	Ask a question to elicit a defence of a line of argument
Counter	State an opinion or ask a question containing an alternative line of argument
Inform-fact	State a fact
Inform-opinion	State one's personal opinion
Encourage	Monitor progress and give encouragement and/ or positive feedback
Critique	Give constructive criticism
Ask/clarify	Ask a clarification question
Metastatement	Ask a question or make a statement about the task (rather than the topic)

Walker (2004) retrospectively explored feedback provided by tutors to students on a course that facilitated debates on topic of interest through text-based communication online. She concluded that the most used moves were 'probe', 'encourage' and 'challenge'. 'Challenge' moves required the student to reflect on and provide a justification for a view. It was also reported that despite its low usage, 'counter' might be highly effective in furthering student writing if used in a devil's advocate role as a 'game tactic', rather than as a 'right answer' (p. 181), to force students to consider another opinion. However, Walker

(2004) admits that this move might be discouraging if students perceive it as a strong critique. It was found that 'inform' moves in the online discourse explored by Walker were rare as tutors were attempting to elicit reflection rather than transferring knowledge.

3 Outcome of the Practice

Section 3.1 below presents an example of a student draft with my feedback using the DISCOUNT system and modal verbs rather than imperatives to lessen the authoritarian tone of the discourse, followed by a discussion on the effectiveness of this feedback on the basis of students' end-of-semester comments. Section 3.2 presents a student's comments to me after she had received feedback. It can be seen from this that she herself adopted a similar dialogic voice. It was found that this behaviour was taken up by at least 10 students when responding to feedback, demonstrating that the climate was encouraging dialogue. Ethical approval was given by the university to use the students' work. The students also consented to using their written work for research purposes. Their identities are anonymised.

3.1 Student text with feedback from tutor using DISCOUNT coding system

Below are my comments presented in text boxes. The comments are labelled in accordance with Walker's (2004) typology. The student is discussing the use of Bourdieu's (1978) theory of habitus as a theoretical framework for research design. Webb, Schirato and Danaher (2002, pp. 12-13) define the habitus as:

'A concept that expresses, on the one hand, the way in which individuals become themselves -develop attitudes and dispositions – and, on the other hand, the ways in which those individuals engage in practices. An artistic habitus, for example, disposes the individual artist to certain activities and perspectives that express the culturally and historically constituted values of the artistic field'.

The student proposes that habitus can be combined with critical race theory to explore why certain ethnicities develop a certain habitus. For example, why do black African Americans make up most players in sports such as basketball and the NFL at elite levels in the United States? According to a report in The Atlantic (https://www.theatlantic.com/notes/2016/02/what-about-the-disproportionate-diversity-in-pro-sports/471360/), the NBA in 2015 was composed of 74.4 percent black players. Is there a culture that channels this ethnicity into these sports rather than other sports? According to an NBC journalist (https://www.nbcnews.com/news/nbcblk/all-black-high-school-team-s-success-highlights-golf-s-n1100021) in 2019, 1.5 percent of elite golfers were African American. The habitus of these individuals is constructed through socio-cultural influences which leads to and reinforces certain sport practices. The student would like to explore the idea that Malay individuals' in Singapore are not disposed to Ultimate frisbee in the same way that black African Americans are not disposed to golf. He would like to question why Ultimate is a predominantly a Chinese sport in Singapore.

> **Inform opinion/ Encourage as general feedback**: 'I think you have a sound idea for a theoretical framework here with critical race theory and Habitus. However, you could bring in more concepts to explain the theories better (see comments below).

I will first apply Bourdieu's (1978) theory on the class acquisition of habitus, that may be linked to how a minority has access to different opportunities to participate in a sport (Stuij, 2015). Furthermore, there has been a focus on the class-based acquisition of habitus that may be linked to how minority have access to different opportunities.

> **Challenge:** 'The reader might not see a lot of difference in meaning between these two sentences relating to Bourdieu and Stuij. If you are trying to distinguish between theory (Bourdieu, 1978) and research conducted (Stuij, 2015), it could be clearer. Or perhaps you want to discuss 'opportunity' generally at first? In which case, you might delete 'to participate in a sport' in the first sentence'.
>
> **Inform-fact:** 'You do not appear to bring this research from Stuij (2015) into the literature review'.
>
> **Metastatement:** 'You might do that as it is important in the IMRD structure that the sections relate well to each other'.

There have been little studies that investigate the significance of habitus' effects on opportunities into sport, as well as how culture of different groups could affect the opportunities to participate in sports.

> **Counter:** 'You might want to point out that in the Singapore context there is no research in this field. However, there are several studies that explore this idea e.g., Kay, J., & Laberge, S. (2002). The New' Corporate Habitus in Adventure Racing. *International review for the sociology of sport, 37*(1), 17-36'.
>
> **Critique:** 'Your explanation of habitus appears too simplistic: you may want to add in more conceptual understanding by discussing field and capital and how these might help to form a person's dispositions'.

In this research, we wish to use Hylton's (2009) critical race theory. We may understand how the individual perceives race and their roles within the system.

> **Prompt:** 'I think you might want to say, 'perceives their own embodied racial dispositions'? So, you could discuss embodiment (the social construction of the body) here'.

> **Instruct:** 'This appears too informal for academic writing. You might want to think of a better reporting verb you can use to have the right register: https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/al/globalpad/openhouse/academicenglishskills/grammar/reportingverbs/'

Hylton (2009) talks about racial channeling and social stacking. Racial channeling is the idea that athletes are expected to play in certain sports due to their race. This is important with regards to our research as we aim to find out whether there may be instances of social channeling for Malays in Singapore to sports apart from Ultimate Frisbee. We also examine the concept of social stacking, where different races are stereotyped into being selected into different positions on a team.

> **Ask/clarify:** 'You might want to change social to *racial stacking* as social is more general e.g. gender/sexuality & class'.

And this could contribute to the socialization of Malays into certain sports where they are exposed to from a young age. Therefore, I wish to combine these theories and concepts to be able to provide a clear theoretical lens on why there are a lack of Malays in Ultimate Frisbee.

> **Inform-fact:** 'Try to avoid starting a sentence with 'And' – this is normally used to combine 2 sentences not in initial position'.

> **Encourage as general feedback:** 'I hope this feedback is useful and can help you to further improve the paper'

'He demonstrates more care and concern for his students' education than required of him.'

'He is supportive as a teacher and understanding that such a module can be challenging for some people. He provided a lot of feedback on how to improve my assignments and always found ways to encourage me to better the assignment.

'He treats every single student, and assignment with care.'

'He genuinely cares for every student and does not hesitate to reach out to students that requires his assistance.'

At the end of the module, many participants identified the tutor feedback as an important element of the way the module had been managed during the COVID-19 crisis. Several examples of student responses from official end of semester questionnaire are provided below:

3.2 Students' own use of text-based communication

This style of giving feedback in text-based communication also encouraged students themselves to return their worked drafts to me using a similar dialogic approach. Below is an example list of questions that a student embedded into her own paper and sent as an attachment:

Can I check with you if the sources that I add into findings have to come from the literature review or can it be an additional source altogether?

If adding in sources that are not from the literature review is fine too, is it the case that bringing in sources from the literature review is better because the better connection between the literature review and findings sections increases the paper's overall coherence?

Does the maximum word count of 2.2k words exclude in-text citations, content in the tables, table captions, paper's heading and sub-headings?

In the code of practice document, there is a question: "Will your information automatically be anonymized in your research?". If the information is anonymized does that mean either replacing the interviewees' names with a pseudo name or coding their profiles into Player 1 (P1), Player 2 (P2), Coach 1 (C1) and Coach 2 (C2)?

The student concluded her email text to the tutor in the following way:

Thank you so much and sorry for bombarding you with so many questions ha-ha ><

Warmest Regards,

A great number of questions of this type were asked by students in their own papers and returned to the tutor for further discussion. This had occurred but in a more limited way prior to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Additionally, students clearly felt able to communicate informally with the tutor. It was hypothesised that the physical distance constraints during the crisis might amplify cultural and emotional distance (Moore & Kearsley, 2012; Hara & King, 2000; Sharma & Maleyeff, 2003; Thorpe, 2002).

However, it appeared to not seriously impact the communicative interaction. Additionally, the student was able to use 'ha-ha' and signs '><' to demonstrate laughter. These emotional moves were welcomed by the tutor particularly as students in South East Asian cultures are reported to view their teacher as an authoritative figure (Lee et al. 2009). For the tutor, these signs demonstrated that students were freely expressing themselves emotionally despite the emergency remote teaching (ERT) context.

4 Conclusion

To conclude, although the coding system trialled might not be the entire cause for the student feedback citing care, support and encouragement, or the cause for the way the student is able to express herself (haha / ><), it is clear that there is a correlation. There were less instances of this kind of interaction in previous semesters. Thus, I would hypothesise that this coding system helped to reduce the impact of the physical distancing from going online established due to conducting emergency remote teaching (ERT) during the COVID-19 pandemic. It can be intimated that the strategy aided in building rapport with students during emergency remote teaching (ERT). However, it is too early to hypothesise to what extent it played a role.

From this study, I would recommend that tutors are aware of the potential problems related to emotional distance (Moore & Kearsley, 2012) and cultural distance (Hara & King, 2000; Thorpe, 2002) in online text-based educational environments. Affective repercussions can have a serious impact on learning if student-student and tutor-student interactions are not managed effectively. A tutor should make great efforts to lessen potential repercussions of physical distance in the online environment. Being aware that adopting a range of communicative moves with students, other than imperatives, is one strategy that an online tutor can exploit. Additionally, using hedging helps to convey a less authoritarian teacher voice. These strategies combined may help to produce a more conducive educational environment that encourages students to find their own online presence and express themselves with confidence.

The next step forward in this ongoing research is to interview students to ask their views on the use of Socratic dialogue and hedging in text-based communication, and its relationship to tutor-student rapport. It might also be interesting to have a control group who receives only imperatives for comparison. Future research might also further explore the use of the feedback structure trialled in this paper in other educational contexts. It might emerge that certain moves are preferred by different educationalists, perhaps even combinations of moves e.g., instruct-encourage; or new moves such as empathise might be added to the list applied from Walker's (2004) DISCOUNT categories. A further exploration might also be to video record online Zoom consultation sessions discussing the student texts with their embedded comments, and to analyse how the spoken discourse between tutor and student refers to and unpacks that feedback in real time. It would also be interesting to have some controlled samples whose feedback is comprised of imperatives for these Zoom sessions, and to compare the consultations to observe if there is a real difference in the affective domain, which impacts the effectiveness of the interactions.

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