

Constructing ethnicity and identity in the online classroom: Linguistic practices and ritual text acts

Leah P. Macfadyen

Skylight (Science Centre for Learning and Teaching), The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, leah.macfadyen@ubc.ca

Abstract

In this paper I describe how online learners participate in textually-mediated 'ritual performance' as a means of attesting to their ethnicity and constructing cultural identities in a virtual learning environment. Evidence for this phenomenon emerged from an investigation of cultural identity and learning in a virtual classroom, in which I examined web-based student communications from several iterations of a new international online undergraduate course. I present, here, some of this data, with a focus on 'ritual text acts' that participants seem to perform. I draw attention to the ways participants not only ritually perform their affiliations with established national, ethnic or 'racial' groups through the use of stylized language, but also how they then ritually challenge these essentialized models of identity. In particular, I explore apparent ritual performances of new hybrid global identities, and moments of ritual resistance to expected learner identities or practices. I argue that that these ritual practices, performed in text, are a significant strategy that virtual learners employ in construction of authentic individual identities - a critical first step in development of a new learning community with a shared learning culture.

Keywords

Culture, ethnicity, identity, text act, ritual, virtual classroom, online classroom, online learning

Modes of authenticity in textual reality

In any newly established learning environment, diverse learners – already inscribed with the rituals and customs of other communities to which they belong – encounter each other. The idealized expectation is that they will engage intellectually with each other, with course materials and with their instructors, through such intellectual performances as elaborating arguments or criticizing ideas. This kind of intellectual performance, however, presupposes a wealth of background understanding: shared assumptions, shared concepts, shared understanding of methods of argument. If learners do not arrive with a common cultural (and intellectual) heritage, they must negotiate or co-construct a new *learning culture* in which the 'rules of engagement' are understood and shared, before fruitful intellectual engagement can begin.

Careful reflection on this idea reveals the intimate connection between individual learner identities and development of group culture. Newly assembled groups of learners do not (necessarily) comprise homogeneous anonymous beings between whom communication and interaction 'happens'. Rather, they are a heterogeneous mixture of individuals who may or may not share common values, educational experiences, worldviews or perspectives. The processes of negotiating meaning, and co-construction of group culture demand that individuals reveal, share and negotiate *differences*. That is to say, for any learning community to develop, for the construction of a learning culture to begin, learners must first be able to enact their authentic and differing identities in the learning space.

Do learners face special challenges when they convene in a *virtual* learning environment? Cyberspace (and, in particular, virtual learning environments), remains an overwhelmingly 'discursive and rhetorical space' (Nakamura, 2002, p. xiii); it is primarily a 'written world' (Feenberg, 1989), constructed from text. In the text-based communications of cyberspace, bodily markers of identity such as physical attributes and vocal accent, are often invisible and bodily participation in gesture and ritual is usually impossible. Zurawski (2000) has gone as far as to argue that the physical body is, in effect, 'banned from the Internet'. And yet, in interpersonal encounters, an individual's authenticity – a term

that in English connotes 'truth', 'accuracy of (self)representation' and 'trustworthiness' – is supposed to be guaranteed by physical presence (Feenberg, 1989) and the evidence of the senses. Concerns therefore persist about the Internet as a problematic site for meaningful learner interaction and negotiation of learning cultures that can support 'engaged collaborative discourse' - proposed to be the ideal form of discussion in a virtual learning environment (Xin & Feenberg, 2006).

Poster (2001) has asked:

Can there be a form of culture that is not bound to the surface of the globe, attaching human beings to its particular configurations with the weight of gravity, inscribing their bodies with its rituals and customs...? (p. 150)

To paraphrase Poster, I ask: Can there be learning cultures that do not depend for their existence on geographical location or physical presence? If so, how can we best characterize their nature and development? I will argue here that learners in text-based virtual learning environments begin the process of co-constructing a virtual learning culture by performing and sharing their unique virtual identities, and that one of the key strategies that individuals and newly forming virtual communities make use of in this process is ritual.

The role of ritual

Sociologist Paul Connerton has described the powerful 'collectivizing' role of ritual in human societies. On the role of ritual in construction of 'collective memory' – the communal narrative of a group – he writes:

Both ritual and myth may quite properly be viewed as collective symbolic texts; and on this basis one may then go on to suggest that ritual actions should be interpreted as exemplifying...cultural values (1989, p. 53)

As with most sociological theory, there is much disagreement about the exact definition of 'ritual' - these have been thoroughly reviewed by Bell (1992). For our purposes here, however, it is useful to consider the definition proposed by Lukes, who suggests that a ritual is a 'rule-governed activity of a symbolic character which draws the attention of its participants to objects of thought and feeling that they hold to be of special significance' (1975, p. 291). Rituals, clarifies Connerton (1989) are repetitive and often stylized; they are expressive rather than instrumental, and they are expressive 'by virtue of their conspicuous regularity' (p. 44). Most significant here is Connerton's argument that the expressive influence of ritual is not limited to the ritual moment itself – rather, the expressive power of ritual thoroughly permeates non-ritual action, 'the whole life of a community' (p.45). Importantly, although many rituals 'appear' to be a re-enactment or commemoration of the past –'an explicit claim to be commemorating continuity' (p.45) – Connerton points out that human communities routinely invent *new* rituals, ceremonies and commemorations in the 'rewriting' (or re-interpreting) of collective identity.

While most ritual theorists have tended to focus on the bodily practices of rites and ceremonies, Connerton (1989) explores the ways in which language, too, can be performative and ritualistic. The linguistic rituals of liturgy, for example, are not a 'verbal commentary on an action external to itself'. Rather, liturgical language is an action in and of itself (p. 57). Oaths, blessings, curses, recitations, songs, stories, poems and prayers also make use of repeated patterns of syntax, vocabulary and sequencing, with powerful mnemonic effect. Similarly, Austin's philosophy of language (1962) explains that 'performative utterances' possess 'illocutionary force' – they do not simply offer statements *about* the world that can be characterized as true or false. Instead, 'speech acts' or 'illocutionary acts' *do* something instead of simply *saying* something: they fulfil a range of symbolic purposes, including representing the self and the nature of the self's relationship with others. In other words, rituals – corporeal and/or linguistic – are both performative and creative. They acknowledge and commemorate existing elements of shared identity, and they contribute to the construction of new forms, and new interpretations, of community and collective identity. They allow individuals to celebrate, maintain and reinforce existing bonds, and they are routinely employed to create new social and interpersonal bonds.

Rituals performed in textual language might appear, then, to be a perfectly suited tool for navigating the tension that virtual learners experience between their need to represent their existing identities in a new learning context, and the need to collaborate with new peers in the construction and enlargement of the 'common ground' – the learning culture – that is necessary to permit advancement of the learning agenda. Indeed, precedent already exists to support the proposition that rituals are also practiced in virtual spaces. While theorists have historically understood ritual practice to be necessarily embodied, a newer cohort of investigators has begun to examine ritual practices in a range of online environments (see, for example, work of Gregor Ahn and team at the University of Heidelberg, <http://www.rituals-online.de/>). Langer et al. (2006) have also usefully begun to describe the process of 'ritual transfer': 'the transfer of ritual from one context into another or – more generally – a change of the context surrounding the ritual' (p.1).

Below, I begin to describe how online learners transfer rituals of symbolization and collectivization into virtual learning environments, transforming practices that might previously have taken place through embodied action and sensory perception into explicit articulations in text. Learners participate in an evolving sequence of textual rituals that serve to expand their 'common ground' – the collection of shared values and assumptions that are necessary for continuing dialogue and collective construction of meaning.

Investigating Textual Practices in Online Learning

The Virtual Learning Environment

In order to investigate in greater detail the strategies that online learners employ in a virtual learning environment to construct and sustain their individual identities, and to negotiate the emerging learning culture with peers, I examined student communications within a web-based interdisciplinary online undergraduate course that I designed and collaboratively developed at The University of British Columbia (UBC), Canada. The course, *Perspectives on Global Citizenship* was envisioned as the first in a new interdisciplinary program collaboratively offered by UBC and partner universities in New Zealand, Hong, Australia and England. It was purposefully designed to foster engaged collaborative discourse. Learning materials are explicit about the contested nature of 'global citizenship' (Roman, 2003), and make no definitive claim about its meaning. Topics (ranging from ethics to sustainability) within its purview are presented using the Blackboard Vista™ course management system in twelve weekly modules, for debate, discussion and critical analysis in actively tutor-facilitated group discussion forums. In spite of the rich interdisciplinary content, *Perspectives on Global Citizenship* is a prime example of the kind of 'discursive and rhetorical space' that Nakamura (2002, p. xiii) describes, with all learner interaction and communication mediated via asynchronous text. Key components of the course explicitly challenge students to consider questions of individual, national and cultural identity in relation to theories of global citizenship. And as described below, the student body in each cohort is extremely diverse, ensuring that no students can assume that they share a common background or approach to learning with peers. These elements make this course an especially rich source of text-based communication in which students are struggling to articulate and represent elements of identity and community.

The Learners

Perspectives on Global Citizenship launched in September 2005 with 42 students from UBC, Hong Kong University and the University of Melbourne. It has been offered every term since. At time of writing, 166 students had completed the course, including 33 (20%) from HKU, 21 (13%) from the University of Melbourne, and the remainder from UBC. Of the total, 53 (32%) were male, and 113 (68%) were female. In all cohorts, students have represented a diverse ethnic mix that is masked by simply considering university or 'national' affiliation. In addition to our Hong Kong Chinese students at HKU, 19 UBC or Melbourne students characterized themselves as first- or second-generation immigrants from Hong Kong or China. Other UBC and Melbourne students self-identified as first- or second- generation immigrants from Egypt, Singapore, the Philippines, the United States of America, South Africa, Iran, Korea, Poland, Thailand, Uruguay, Vietnam, Russia, Romania, Malaysia, Korea, India, Pakistan, Greece, and Singapore. Moreover, the roster included international students attending UBC on student visas from the USA, Turkey, Sri Lanka, Russia, Korea, Kenya, Japan, Indonesia, Colombia, Bermuda, the UK and Mainland China. Some students have noted religious affiliations that included Catholic or Protestant Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, Baha'i and Judaism. Moreover, the course

has attracted students from a wide range of academic disciplines: we enrolled students from degree programs in Arts, Science, Engineering, Social Sciences, Resource Management, Law, Government, Business, Education, Nursing, Medicine, Dentistry and Architecture.

Methodology

To investigate processes of identity development and group culture in this online course, I used a 'grounded theory' methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to examine student discussion messages (off-task and on-task) and (anonymous) student feedback questionnaire responses. I used NVivo™ qualitative analysis software to identify patterns and themes in the data that shed light on the ways in which this diverse group of online learners attempt to construct authentic online identities for themselves as part of the process of negotiating the culture of the new learning space. All learner names have been changed.

Performing the self in text

Within the spectrum of existing virtual environments that support human interaction, the online classroom might be viewed as a relatively constrained venue for digital 'identity play' (that is to say, experimentation with different identities, which may be more or less authentic). With identity tied to institutional registration, payment of tuition fees, and (perhaps of greatest interest to students?) final grades, one might expect that attempts by learners to create 'fake' or deceptive identities will be rare. What kind of 'selves' might our students be constructing in our online classrooms, and how? In his 1992 work *Oneself as Another*, Paul Ricoeur offers an analysis of the self as divided in a way that reflects the material/virtual dilemma of virtual identity. Usefully for our purposes here, he differentiates between two distinct notions of identity: *Idem*-identity, which rests in the physical, and carries notions of 'sameness' and affiliation, and *Ipse*-identity, better characterized as 'selfhood' (that is, non-physical, and unrelated to group affiliation).

In the opening days of the course each term, students are invited to introduce themselves to each other in a 'Participants' Profiles' forum. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a course that is advertised as globally recruiting, many of our learners initiate their self-introduction process by directly referencing their affiliations with (identity with) established national, regional, ethnic or 'racial' groups.

I am from Manitoba and grew up on the lake...

I am Joan from Kenya

Speaking as somebody from the group, I think Jewishness falls under a couple of categories.

Learners reiterate their group membership often, but also perform their affiliations through the use of language clues. One Canadian student adds a touch of humour by using the stylized Canadian 'eh' in a course-based discussion:

Our diversity, in essence, is our identity, eh?

A Hong Kong student meanwhile makes use of an 'insider' youth term for Hong Kong Chinese in discussion of localized practices:

haha.. I read online that apparently, it's a 'Honger thing' to wear T-shirts with a bunch of English words that make no sense whatsoever.

Very quickly, however, student communications fulfil the claim (see, for example, Ess, 2008) that essentialized models of 'national' culture are insufficient markers of individual identity. Students begin to challenge their utility by troubling their neat borders, or engaging in performance of newly synthesized identities. Directly querying our historic conflation of inherited ('racial') characteristics with ethnicity or identity, a Canadian student writes:

I like to think about Canada as place where you can't visually determine who is or isn't Canadian...

Another Canadian student expresses his personal frustrations at the limitations of established national identities:

I feel that I don't know enough about Hong Kong/Chinese culture.. and I seriously do not know enough about Canada to call myself a true Canadian. I'm proud of multiple identities (Canadian-Chinese), but it makes me feel frustrated a lot of times.

Perhaps most amusing are the ways in which virtual learners perform their hybrid identities. In the following exchange, Candy, Jonathan and Yuzhu all present details of their 'official' identities as first

generation immigrant ‘Chinese-Canadians’ who have lived varying proportions of their lives in Hong Kong and Canada. These three sprinkle their ‘serious’ introductions with laughing references to that most quintessential marker of ‘Canadianness’: hockey.

Candy writes:

Hello!! My name is Candy. Yes, home of the junior hockey championship, right here in Vancouver. =)

Jonathan, a rather serious schoolteacher, drafts a response that focuses on WTO riots in Hong Kong, but finished with:

And by the way, Canada is GOLDEN!

And Candy and Yuzhu follow up with:

We rock!!~~~~

YEAH!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

These learners are enacting their Canadianness not only by acknowledging the subject matter, but by claiming North American English slang as their own – classic examples of the ‘performative utterances’ that Austin (1962) described.

These latter examples seem to bear out Ricoeur’s (1992) argument that *Idem*-identity – identity acquired by affiliation and performance of embodied ‘sameness’ fails to answer to the crucial question of identity, ‘Who am I?’ (Vessey, 2002). Instead, they support Hewling’s contention (2005) that culture is ‘an ongoing iterative process’, rather than a static set of assumed structures envisioned in essentialist perspectives and that individual identity ‘is an active process of meaning making and contest over definition’ (Street, 1993, p. 25).

Textual Ipseity

Rituals of initiation

Patterns of text-as-speech that might be interpreted as ‘ritual text acts’ become more apparent when we explore the language our students use in construction of their *Ipsé*-identity – their individual selves.

A surprising set of repeated performative utterances appear in the introductory phase of the course. Newly arrived online, and faced with the task of (re)building and (re)presenting a virtual identity to a new cohort of peers, each student, almost without fail, performs two sets of ritualized acts that seem to counterbalance each other: a performance of credentialling, and a performance of humility – differentiation and new membership.

Students seem anxious to impress upon their peers or instructors the degree to which they are ‘qualified’ to have enrolled in a course about ‘Global Citizenship’. Although it quickly becomes apparent through coursework that our theoretical approach to this topic does not equate it with world travel or cosmopolitanism, new arrivals repeatedly emphasize their international experience, perhaps even vying with each other:

...I was born and raised in one of (I think) the big multicultural capitals in the world...Toronto, Canada...a place where many ethnic groups live.

I have lived in Vancouver, Toronto and Hong Kong, and have been to 4 of the 7 continents

They quickly follow this up, however, with clarifications about their newness to online classrooms:

...don't know really know how to do this.. or how much to write.. so here goes

This is my first online course as well and I'm trying to get used to it.

Lastly, like many other fellow classmates, this is my first online course so i'm still experimenting with it.

One is reminded of ritual genuflections towards an altar by worshippers entering a church. One by one these learners reveal themselves as ‘new’, and make use of this shared newness as an early step in establishing community ‘norms’ or commonality.

As Xin & Feenberg (2006) note, online discussion (like face-to-face speech), ‘combines many speech acts in each utterance’ (p. 3). Unsurprisingly then, the sample student utterances shown here seem to simultaneously perform several functions, even while the actual content of each statement is relatively

unimportant: they highlight persistent individual identity versus 'group culture' tensions by seeking to both differentiate self through credentials and at the same time initiate membership in the group through shared experience of newness; and they position selves as 'experienced' but also as 'inexperienced', begging leniency from the group and from instructors.

Rituals of resistance

Perhaps the most vivid ritual performances of self in our virtual classroom take place where learners are at pains to resist or deny what they perceive as expected learner identity or practices.

Bryan, an experience online communicator and a mature adult learner, is unable (or unwilling?) to participate in the ritual of newness that younger students harness. Instead, he launches himself into a performative resistance of this norm with humour and gusto. Before even initiating his online discussion postings, this learner made use of the very limited 'roster' tool in the Blackboard Vista™ course management system to highlight the inadequate vision of learner identity that it projects or permits:

Academic Major:	Free Speech
Affiliation:	Who'll ever take me
Extra-Curricular Activities:	Rugby... more rugby... programming... creating websites, and rugby
Areas of Interest:	Did I mention rugby, pretty decent photographer and videographer, creating media content on websites, I forgot the most important, single malt scotch whiskey
Title:	Old Dude, Zeus, Moses, Hay-zoo
YEAR:	It's 2007 right now, I thought most people knew that, next year will be 2008
PROGRAM:	Yes I do, thanks for asking, ColdFusion mostly

Figure 1. A Mature Learner Pokes Fun at BlackBoard Vista's 'Fill in the Blanks' Roster Tool

He also adds a photograph, which not only gives clues to his ethnic origins and hobbies, but also clearly emphasizes his seniority relative to other students. In on-task and off-task discussion forums, Bryan repeatedly performs himself as 'in opposition', describing himself as a 'troublemaker', an 'active experimenter', a 'devil's advocate' with 'ulterior motives', an 'idealist' with grassroots affiliations, and a visionary with a 'master plan' whom we might perhaps want to 'isolate to his own group'. 'Let noone accuse me of being a realist' he adds, when challenged to explain how his ideas could be implemented. Indeed, Bryan seems to make a point of polite but pointed ritual verbal duelling with all three co-instructors in this course whom he characterizes as 'our esteemed professors'. Bryan's unrelenting performance of self-in-resistance, his repeated positioning of himself as an experienced professional instructing classmates (rather than as a peer), illustrates the extent to which we rely on our inter-relations with others in the positioning of our selves. It appears that it is not sufficient for Bryan to 'know' these aspects of his own history and identity; rather, he seems compelled to repeatedly perform these aspects of himself within the virtual learning environment so that they can be acknowledged and reflected back to him by others.

In his hermeneutics of selfhood (*Iipse*-identity), Ricoeur (1992) describes the role of 'attestation' (belief) of truth or certainty about self. Attestation is a testimony, a form of self-witnessing that is performed through repeated (ritualized) speech acts by the individual self. It is, he argues, an assurance that the self believes in the truth or validity of being oneself, acting and suffering (Vessey, 2002). Bryan's ritual attestation, performed in text-as-speech, not only allows him to construct a dynamic and narrative self identity, it defines his self as the agent of this self-constructive act. His determination to perform his own self in opposition to existing models reminds one of Bell's (1997) proposition that one of the many functions of ritual is to act as a means of 'struggling over control of the sign' (p.89).

Ritual performance of new community

In the active process of identity construction in the online classroom, online discussions are the 'nexus of cultural production' (Reeder et al., 2004) and the visible manifestation of individual interactions between learners and the elements that make up the online context: peers, instructors, delivery platform, course materials and institutional culture (Hewling, 2005). Hewling makes use of Gee's (2000) notions of 'enactive' and 'recognition' work in the construction of meaning. According to Gee, enactive work describes the efforts individuals make to organize contextual elements and accord them value and meaning, while recognition work describes the responses of others who may agree or disagree. Within the context of this online course, I observe students enacting a range of ritual performances of 'new' and shared identities (proposing, for example, new choices and behaviours that they seek to integrate), and repeated rounds of recognition work as classmates query or reinforce these. For example, towards the end of the course, one student writes:

...as global citizens we can either be complicit or critical. By pointing the finger at ourselves (or at least Canadians in particular), we are no longer a passive audience in global issues but active participants.

And a classmate responds, recognizing and acknowledging this identity claim:

Who knows, we may even be able to become some sort of influential group...perhaps the first true 'Global Citizens'.

Exemplifying the evolving sense of community, learners increasingly write about *we*, rather than *I*.

The implications for learning

It appears, then, that in this virtual learning environment, learners have transferred and transformed 'first life' rituals of identity formation and community building into forms that exemplify (new) cultural values, as Connerton (1989) suggests. Learners perform themselves through a range of ritual text-as-speech acts that do not simply describe pre-existing identity but also construct it. Transferring elements of real life rituals (for example the use of coded language) to the virtual space, they ritually restate details of their ethnic or national membership (or non-membership) in order to clarify or trouble the identity they possess through a range of other group affiliations, attesting their individual identities in relation to others. They participate in new rituals – cycles of enaction and recognition of new shared identities for members of this learning community as they perform and renegotiate their virtual selves. Together, these practices help learners establish authentic virtual identities – identities that they and others experience as true, trustworthy and accurate representations of the self. After all, as Connerton (1989) illustrates, rituals are not merely formalized repetitions performed by uninvolved actors; participants in some sense feel them to be obligatory, and participation in a rite is always, in a sense 'an assent to its meaning' (p. 45).

Establishment of learner identities allows the development of a learning community. Learners in this course comment spontaneously and repeatedly on their surprise at the social and relational aspects of their course experience, and about the impact and value of their online encounters with international classmates:

...The involvement and interest from everyone. I thought that there was a risk with an online subject that people wouldn't give it much effort or thought because you can hide behind a computer screen, but in reality the involvement level is probably better than in most of the 'real' classes I have been in.

Importantly, learner comments demonstrate that this virtual learning community had developed a learning culture in which they felt able to take risks and make mistakes, or express dissent. They indicate that course discussions facilitated the development of trust, solidarity, security and empathy that a range of learning theorists insist is necessary for trying on another point of view.

Initially I was very hesitant in everything I wrote, I didn't want to sound like I didn't know what I was talking about. But, I have started to realize that isn't so bad, as this is a course, and I'm supposed to be learning.

In conclusion, while Xin & Feenberg (2006) have identified four layers of important communicative interaction in online discussion (intellectual engagement, communication and common ground, dialogue and motivation, and group dynamics and leadership), I suggest that there is a fifth layer that underpins all of these: the layer of utterances that construct individual identities and thus permit the establishment of a new learning community with a shared learning culture.

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