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Analyzing Discursive Interactions of South African Academics in an Online Forum through Young's Communicative Model

Abstract

This paper explores academics' interaction in an online forum, situated on the intranet of a South African university, where perceptions of racism within a larger discourse about transformation are shared and debated. The communicative model of democratic discourse directs the interpretation of an emancipatory discursive interaction, following a deductive textual analysis of the forum and interview texts from selected participants. The communicative model discourages normative judgements of others and focuses on an understanding of difference. The findings indicate that participants who engage in a deliberative demonstration of power, do not appreciate diverse social-historical contexts. Discursive interactions which indicate an understanding of participants' contexts are marked by a mitigating and sympathetic approach which allows for doubt in the judgements of participants. These mitigating interactions do however not persuade all participants to critically reflect on limiting opinions, attitudes and ways of interaction. An online curator who invites participants from diverse contexts might make the discourse more nuanced, create the opportunity to understand multiple realities and facilitate a transformative discussion.

Keywords: communication, discursive democracy, emancipation, narratives, online discourse, online forum, social-historical context, transformation

Introduction

This paper forms part of a larger study which investigated the democratizing potential of an online forum in a university through discursive interactions. As academic institutions in South Africa are in a process of transformation, the voices which are representing contexts different from the established context of the university are crucial for an understanding of diversity.

The New University's (NU, pseudonym) online forum on which this paper focuses was established in 2001 by management and named "Have your say" to provide a space for academics to voice their concerns about the transformation of the institution. Issues such as racism, the medium of instruction, academic standards and the role of religion were regular points of discussion. This paper focuses on a specific discussion on the forum which had a lifetime of 12 days. In an attempt to understand whether participants experienced their involvement in the forum as empowering, an analysis was done of their interaction. They were also invited to refer in their interviews to previous discussions with opposing participants during the past two years. Bettina starts the discussion by providing quotations from posters made by students from black consciousness movements which call for a protest march. She also provides her opinion of the students' posters and their planned

march. Responses of Stephen, Amanda and Pieter to Bettina form part of the analysis.

The critical question is whether the two main participants (Bettina and Stephen) who were in a dialectic relationship did contribute to the forum in a way which was transformative of themselves and others. Another question which seeks exploration is what should change before the forum can enable people to transform themselves.

Inclusivity in the discursive models of democracy

Communicative engagement

The deliberative (Habermas, 1990a, 1990b) and communicative (Young, 1990, 1996, 2000, 2001) paradigms of democratic discourse do not share prerequisites for the attainment of emancipation through moral discourse. Although these discursive models have the attainment of respect as a shared ideal, they prescribe contrasting objectives and forms of discursive engagement between people who are in disagreement. The Habermas (1990a, 1990b) model holds that the objective of discourse is for parties in disagreement to reach consensus through a process of rational engagement, which entails the respectful and reciprocal provision of arguments and evidence, referred to as Ideal Speech. Habermas (1990a, 1990b) proposes that moral dialogue requires people to adopt a standpoint of impartiality towards all particular experiences and to assent to only those principles and judgements that are consistent with objective impartial standpoints.

The communicative model differs from the rational model both in the prerequisites concerning the form of discourse and the role which particular experiences play. Young's communicative model expands the rational engagement model as the basis of reasoning towards an inclusive communicative engagement. This implies an appreciation of all forms of communication, which represents diverse interpretations of a multi-layered society. The objective of discourse in the communicative model is not for people to agree, but rather to reach an understanding of their opponents' views, which are based on their experiences of their specific situations. Young proposes that moral and political norms are best tested by actual dialogue (not ideal speech) in which multiple needs, interests, and perspectives are represented. She wishes for the development of moral respect through the understanding of differences. Young holds that moral judgement "must begin from historically specific circumstances... reflecting from within a particular social context, good normative theorizing cannot avoid social and political description and explanation" (1990, p. 5).

Understanding differences

The communicative model of democratic discourse focuses on the understanding of others through narratives or life stories. Although these narratives are interpretations of specific subjective experiences, the communicative model would allow as many narratives as it can, to be representative of the diversity of a multi-layered society. Life stories' value lies in the fact that they speak across the differences people have and can inform and influence people to such an extent, that they can place themselves in the shoes of others, and attain "enlarged thought", a cognitive and emotional position which Benhabib (1992) and Thorseth (2008) also

support. By placing oneself in the shoes of others, one can revise own beliefs and attitudes in this process of critical reflection (Mezirow, 2011) as the opponent is humanised.

Understanding others also requires the “attendance to the difference between privileged and oppressed groups which forms part of the political and social landscape” (Young, 2000). The acknowledgement that South Africa’s colonial past has led to the formation of oppressed and privileged groups would be insightful.

The inclusive approach in the humane and caring attendance to and the appreciation of difference in a multilayered society, which Young (1996) holds as emancipatory to the self and others, form the theoretical point of departure in the analysis of the discursive interaction on the forum.

Data collection, creation and analysis

The study relied on two data sources, the text which Bettina, Stephen, Pieter and Amanda (pseudonyms) created in the selected forum discussion and the transcribed interviews. The duration of the face to face interviews with Bettina, Stephen and Pieter was an hour. Amanda could not participate in an interview.

The specific forum text was shared with Bettina, Stephen and Pieter prior to the interview to provide them with the opportunity to reflect in advance about the focus of the discussion. During the interview, the participants were asked whether they:

- 1) experienced any shift in their views and attitudes about those with whom and from whom they differed;
- 2) found theirs and others’ participation meaningful and empowering.

Young’s model of communicative discourse informed the deductive analysis of the forum and interview texts. The communicative model was used to indicate oppressive and emancipatory forms of participation. The analysis of the interviews transcripts was informed by the prior analysis of the forum text, where the main categories were inductively formed, namely the motivation of participants, their strategies of interaction and the consequence of their participation. Within the categories, divisions were made, such as a reactionary or mediating motivation for forum participation, a strategy of interaction which is contributing to or weakening the forum discourse, the consequence of forum interaction being either to end the participation or to continue discussions.

Findings

Bettina opens the discussion and titles it “Racism, the other side” by quoting the content of posters and pamphlets of PASMA (Pan Africanist Student Movement of Azania) and ANCYL (African National Congress Youth League). These posters call for a protest on the campus of the NU against sentiments of white supremacy in the classes and curriculum. The protests are partially spurred by the alleged racist comments of a white lecturer.

Emphasizing the difference between the self and the others

Bettina focuses on herself as a white victim of Black Consciousness in referring to her interpretation of the message that “everything white is bad, everything black is good”. She counters the perception of being bad by describing her pride in the

essence of her being: a white Westerner, a descendent of those who civilised Africa: "I am white and my ancestors arrived here 300 years ago and brought civilization".

In a reaction to the students' posters in which they express their pride in being black ("Black is beautiful"), Bettina describes herself as their opposite, as a proud white Western lecturer upholding academic standards which she perceives the Africans are not capable of doing. In her text, the contrast between herself and the black students is indicated by the words "I" and "them", "those people". She furthers this personal opposition by referring to the achievements of Western science and civilisation in contrast to "African backwardness". Bettina comments on their language mistakes by making interjections and punctuations in the quoted text as proof of the low academic standards of the students: "He will never make us feel offended by our past and our blackness because black is beautiful he can utter such nonsense black will still be beautiful (**language??????**)".

Bettina distances herself from the black students, thereby not showing interest or having sympathy for their specific reasons for distress, fear and insecurity. Her text is reactionary to the students' sentiments. If the black students take pride in being black, she takes pride in being white. If they disregard western knowledge, she takes pride in her knowledge and inheritance. The text does not go beyond being reactionary and does not seek for the reasons of the sentiments expressed by the black students. Bettina does not show interest in enlarging her thinking to entertain the position of the black students.

It appears that Bettina fails to see that her feelings of disempowerment and indignance are echoed in the sentiments expressed in the students' posters. She rather perceives the emotions and actions of the students as extreme, anarchist, hateful, and expressed with "the minimal provocation". In this sense she sees their reasons for the protest as irrational. By vilifying their actions, Bettina distances herself from the students and does not allow herself to entertain or attempt to understand their reasons for dismay. An interest in and appreciation for the students' sentiments and particular socio-political situation are traits which are mediated in the communicative model of Young (1990). The absence of these traits leads to a moralistic distancing, as seen in the attitude Bettina assumes towards the students.

I tried to understand how Bettina constructs her reality during our interview. During student protests in her previous position as a lecturer at another institution she also could not understand the students' motivation for the repetitive vandalism of buildings (Bettina's response). Her perception of this cycle of unreasonable violence instilled fear, desperation and also aggression.

The sentiments of Bettina are better understood when one sees it in the larger context of South Africa's colonial and apartheid past. Bettina's position to the students speaks of an ideological cocoon in which colonial whiteness is often glorified and seen as superior. Being blinded by these sentiments, she does not acknowledge the oppression of black people and the privilege which apartheid and colonialism brought to white people.

Moral judgement

In their forum texts Stephen and Amanda contribute the same sentiments to Bettina which she contributes to the protesting students. Amanda describes her views as hateful and poisonous. Stephen sees her participation as racist and

uninformed. He states his opposing normative position to Bettina by portraying a definite distance between his life view and consequent way of acting and the opinions and actions of Bettina. He assumes a moralistic tone in his regard of her as “ungrateful and uncaring” and also portrays the same rationalistic attitude which Bettina assumes with the students, commenting on her inability to formulate proper academic arguments. Stephen challenges her to provide a piece of academic writing which follows the rules of discourse:

Stephen: Listing endless examples is not good enough, use them, make an argument, build something convincing by clearly explaining how it is that the evidence that you are presenting supports the assertion that you are trying to make. That is called reasoning, and it is the most important part of academic writing.

Stephen claims that Bettina is racist and her narratives are corroborating her position: “Bettina is racism dressed as reason and concealed behind some quotes”.

Enlarged thought

Pieter’s interaction with Bettina is more constructive than the others. His expression of care towards Bettina is a strategy of interaction which is mediated in Young’s communicative model. He furthers his mediating position by expressing doubt in Stephen’s normativist categorisation that Bettina is a racist. He offers a mitigating interaction with Bettina which has the potential to lead her to moments of insight in her attitude towards the black students. He tries to be more understanding by not taking a confronting or opposing stance, but by being more probing and more inquiring. Pieter acts sympathetically by affirming his belief in Bettina’s good intentions and by praising her for speaking out. Using words which have a positive emotional appeal is a way in the communicative model (Young, 2000) to create and attain respect and trust:

Pieter: I believe in your good intentions and your commentary is also much more worth than the silent majority. Therefore I think, that people think you are a big racist, which might not really be true, as I said, I believe in your integrity. But your way of writing creates the wrong impression with people, perhaps a milder tone might perhaps help. Just a diplomatic advice.

Bettina: Thank you Pieter. I do not have the gift of the gag and it might be the reason for the way I am writing.

This mitigating participation brings another character to a thread which has been dictated by Stephen and Bettina who have disdain for each other’s position and are focused on winning the argument. The remark of Pieter, “I believe in your good intentions” creates trust in each other and the intent not to vilify her creates a respectful relationship between Bettina and Pieter. Pieter does also not attribute immoral characteristics to Bettina, as is the case with Stephen who describes her as: “ungrateful and uncaring”. He doubts the consensus her adversaries reach that she is a racist and does not presume that he knows her. Pieter adopts a stance of “moral humility” (Young, 1997) when he acknowledges that even if he does not know Bettina, he states his belief in her integrity instead of judging her as moral inferior.

The communicative model (Young, 2000, 2001, 2003) recognises feelings of doubt versus the forms of sure knowledge of the rational model. Pieter refrains from putting Bettina in the racist category, presuming thereby that he knows her, which is

a characteristic of those who operate in the rational model. It becomes clear that those strategies of discursive interaction which are more sympathetic and which allow for doubt in the dominating consensus of the group (e.g. that Bettina is a racist), have more potential to bring participants to some form of normative self-reflection than the rationalistic and moralistic forms of the rational model of discourse.

The protagonists (Stephen and Bettina) reach an intertextual fatigue in the forum. The stronger their motivation is in arguing an opinion which contradicts the other, the more frustrated they become. Their interactions reach the stage where they are degrading each other's person. The limited dynamics of the forum is evident in the fact that the forum itself cannot enable its participants to reach emancipation. It is therefore necessary that the dynamics of the forum should be changed to ensure that it offers a space where participants can reflect critically and reach a form of emancipation.

Bettina does not reach insight in her own limiting position as her contribution remains reactionary. In the interview, Stephen realised that he practised "hermeneutic bullying" and that he should in hindsight not have been so "hard core". Bettina's contributions also echo the rational model as she presumes to know others by placing them in categories. Bettina does not realize that she has a negative and judgmental attitude towards the students she referred to. Bettina's inability to do self-reflection suggests that she is still captured in the apartheid ideology and is not able to really see others.

Conclusion and recommendations

This paper explains how the discursive structures in the forum allow participants to develop an understanding of the other. The inclusivity of the forum is determined by the type of discursive strategy which is dominant. It is evident that the communicative model brings more emancipation to the participants, but that the rational model, which was more prevalent, did estrange the participants and made the forum exclusive.

The following recommendations can enable participants to be more inclusive and offer the opportunity for critical self-reflection and development as professional educators:

- Reflections post-forum brought insight in limited behaviour and the resolution not to interact with others in ways which are flaming conflict and alienate those with opposing viewpoints. A moderator can provide a space for reflection and invite participants to rethink their positions or opinions.
- Although introspection or self-reflection brought some insight, an exposure to other narratives would make the forum more inclusive. As Young (2000, p. 129) allows for narratives which "supplement argument by providing ways of speaking across differences in the absence of shared understandings" those narratives which reveal one-sided views, such as Bettina's, do create a problem. A moderator or curator of the forum should invite a multiplicity of views to the forum.
- Living in a post-apartheid society asks for an affective education, as our social-historical context of racial division brought feelings of hatred and fear.

The affective education includes more than emotions and has to do with how those we perceive as different are affecting us and how we affect those we perceive as different. A knowledge of these affections can be empowering for both. The affective is not only a reaction, but has to search for constructive relationships. A moderator who is aware of the empowerment in the expression of affect, can help participants to identify and reconstruct their own positions, beliefs and their ability to change themselves. In contrast to the essentialist reductive views of participants by themselves as “a white lecturer”, or as a descendent of Europeans “who brought civilisation”, and the rational categorisation of someone being “a racist”, the notion that people are able to change rather than being stagnant defines the forum as a potentially transformative space.

In order to transform South African universities to places where diversity is understood and appreciated, an online forum can provide a safe and enabling space where academics can initiate a process to change corrosive beliefs of and attitudes towards others. The online environment can ideally create this opportunity with an emancipatory form of curatorship.

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