Positioning theory as analytic tool for understanding intersubjective meaning-making

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Abstract: This paper explores how positioning theory can be used to understand intersubjective meaning-making in CSCL environments. We analyzed asynchronous conversations of three discussion groups in a learning environment designed to teach team process skills. Analysis of the storylines, speech acts and positions taken up by each group provided insights as to how students made meaning in this learning environment.

Positioning theory
Initially introduced to the social sciences by Hollway (1984), the notions of position and positioning are a dynamic alternative to the static concept of a role. That is, one position can only be understood in relation to another position. The position of husband only has meaning in relationship to the position of wife; the student position makes sense only in light of the teacher position. In turn, these positions can only be understood in the context of particular discourses, or storylines. Speech acts take on different meanings depending the position of those who utter them, and the utterances unfold according to the storyline. Analysis of “episodes of social interaction” (Harré & Moghaddam, 2003, p. 3) requires an understanding of “acts” and “actions”. The intention of someone’s action is important, but its significance depends on how it is understood as an act by the recipient. Positions limit the possible acts and actions in any social episode. That is, positions come with duties to act in a certain way given the storyline. Few studies have used positioning theory as a way to understand educational settings, and none have applied it in a CSCL environment. Further, positioning theory may provide an approach to assessing team process and perhaps even group learning in CSCL environments, something which continues to be a challenge for researchers. Our research questions is: How can positioning theory be used to understand meaning-making in a CSCL environment?

Method
Working in Teams traces the experiences of two fictitious teams, Team Green and Team Blue, as they work on design projects. After reading the scenes and reviewing resources, students participated in asynchronous discussions based on a given prompt. All 27 first-year graduate students participated in the Scenario as a required component of the course. Our data sources were the asynchronous discussion transcripts downloaded from the Scenario after the course was complete. Using a sequential strategy (Creswell, 2003; Suthers, 2006) we selected portions of the data to analyze in more detail. We narrowed our focus to the discussions which had the most variation in terms of shared episodes (a sequence of postings around a unifying concept in which participants respond to a previous idea). While Melissa’s group made eight posts, the participants did not respond to each other, therefore there were no shared episodes. Rufus’ group made eleven total posts, eight responses and had three shared episodes. Lilith’s group made 21 posts, 16 responses and had more shared episodes than the other two groups (five). We next looked in depth at each of the three group discussions of this one scene. We followed Hatch’s (2002) steps of interpretive analysis to identify tentative storylines, speech acts and positions being played out among the members of each discussion group.

Findings
We next describe the storylines, speech acts and positions taken up as students discussed the scene. Each group oriented to three perspectives and each perspective had several storylines. First, groups oriented to the perspective of the fictitious, virtual teams (Teams Green and Blue). Second, groups oriented to the perspective of their discussion group. Finally, groups oriented to the perspective of general claims about the nature of teamwork. These three perspectives indicated how the groups understood the task– as a chance to directly respond to the prompt that was given, a chance to engage in dialogue with other members of the discussion group, or a chance to draw broader conclusions about teamwork in general.

Each perspective had its own storylines. From the virtual team perspective, there were storylines of blame and solution. The blame storylines entailed and contrasted faulting one member of the team (“scapegoat”) for the team’s failure with acknowledging that when a team fails, it is everyone’s fault (“shared team blame”). The solution storyline contrasted encouraging the team to come together (“rally the team”) and solve the problem with appealing to the instructor (“appeal to authority”) for a solution. When discussion groups oriented
to the virtual team perspective and its storylines, it kept the meaning making at a concrete level – the level of the fictitious team activities.

From the discussion group perspective, storylines were responding to other group members as part of a learning community (“community”); and making connections between the scene and their own team experiences (“self-reflection”). Participants took up these storylines by addressing their responses, either by name or by reference to a previous post, to another group member. This positioning took place with speech actions of sharing personal experiences, practical job experience or referencing readings from the class. In these storylines participants showed their awareness not only of what was happening with the fictitious teams, but also their own reflections on their experiences as members of the current online discussion group team. Finally, the general team perspective storyline centered on what teams should do, will do, and can do, also taken up with speech actions of outside theoretical resources or personal experience.

Shared episodes consist of positions and speech acts through which participants take up a storyline. First, through a speech action of presenting a new idea, a participant positions herself as knower. Participants took up the action as an act in several ways: 1) with agreement, thereby accepting or supporting the initial speaker’s positioning as knower; 2) with disagreement, thereby re-positioning his or herself as knower; or 3) by augmenting the claims of the first speaker, positioning both together as co-knowers.

We next contrast the three discussion groups positioning, speech acts and storylines, starting with this thread from Melissa’s group.

If I were a member of Team Green, I would definitely sense we were not on the right track. I would suggest going to the instructor to get an advice from him. Also I might think to myself, “Tim, it serves you right. You should have respected other team members’ ideas. You should learn a lesson from this.” Now team green needs a different approach to the project in which more open discussion is valued, beginning with the topic selection.

Moon, in making an initial post rather than responding to a previous post, positions herself as a knower (“I would”, “team green needs”). She takes up the storyline of appealing to the instructor as an authority to solve the team problem. She also scapegoats Tim as the source of blame (“it serves you right”), yet does not suggest that the virtual team orient to that storyline. She speaks directly to the character (“you should have” and “you should learn”) rather than to her group members.

In Derrick’s response he orients to the virtual team storyline of shared team blame (“don’t blame any single person”) by providing a direct response to the prompt (“they should call a meeting”; “this is the time to put our personal difference aside”). He positions himself as a knower (“the thing to do is”) and provides direct instruction to the team (“keep people on topic”). By choosing a new subject line and not responding to Moon’s earlier post, he maintains a storyline of advising the virtual team rather than the storyline of engaging in discussion with the online discussion group. Fairuza posts a response and does not take up a storyline of a learning community, choosing instead to include a new subject line and respond to the prompt (“I would perhaps send an e-mail saying” and “I would act as a harmonizer”) rather than to other members of her discussion group. She also adopts a knower position and takes up the storyline of rallying the team (“other members are equally charged with this bad result”) rather than scapegoating one team member. Ralph’s discussion group took up different storylines than Melissa’s group, as illustrated below.

This seems very obvious, but Tim would probably be the only person who would be in opposition. I believe we should have a meeting with Burt. All four members need to meet with Burt together to discuss some of the team dynamics of the group and the topic. That way no one can feel as though they are getting Burt on their side without other team members. Besides, it would be beneficial for Burt to actually see the group together. Then maybe Burt could constructively suggests ways in which they could better. In the resource about Constructive Criticism (the first article), I believe the most important of the 5 points was about criticizing in private and praising in public. Often times we are so quick to say just what is on our mind without thinking about how it may come across. . .

Ralph takes the position of knower and, like members of Melissa’s group, takes up the storyline of scapegoating Tim and appealing to an authority for the solution (“we should have a meeting with Burt”). Unlike Melissa’s group, Ralph takes up as well the storyline of self-reflection (“often times we are so quick to say just what is on our mind without thinking about how it may come across”) and references course readings. In this way Ralph takes up the online discussion group storylines in addition to the virtual team storylines, something that did not occur in Melissa’s group. In Wei Wei’s
response, she keeps the subject line the same. She positions herself as a knower, rather than a co-knower by disagreeing with Ralph’s suggestion for the team to meet with Burt. Instead, she takes up the storyline of the shared team fault (“our team should discuss...”), and reverts to the virtual team storyline.

Lilith’s group takes up not only the virtual team and online discussion group storylines, but also the “all teams should” general storyline.

I think team green got what they deserved. They let Tim take charge and proceed with a topic they knew didn’t fit the requirements. The only member who should be the least bit surprised by this feedback is Tim. The rest of the members could have prevented this negative feedback by voicing their opinions. Ellen did voice her opinion, but Tim rolled right over her and she backed down. If the other two team members had backed her up, this whole mess could have been prevented. What I’m learning from teamwork is that it is no place for the timid!! You've got to step forward and make your opinions known, otherwise you take the grade your team gives you, not the grade you earn!

Karen positions herself as a knower and takes up the “shared team blame” (“they let Tim take charge”). She then moves into the self-reflection storyline (“what I’m learning from teamwork is”) and the “teams should” (“you’ve got to” and “you have to allow”). She doesn’t speak directly to the characters, but rather to her group members. Ron’s subsequent post takes up the storyline of “shared team blame” and takes up the storyline of being part of a learning community by directly responding to Karen. He positions himself as a co-knower (“you say” and “I also think”). He takes up a storyline of self-reflection (“I know I am really bad with making decisions...”) and of “teams should” (“recognize that some people need that time out”). Karen’s post sustains the storyline by reflecting on her own team experiences (“looking back know, there are things I would have done differently”). She positions herself as a co-knower (“I agree, Ron”) and moves completely away from the virtual team storyline, instead taking up the storyline of engaging in a learning community and the “teams should” storyline (“if you’re reluctant to speak up...”)

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Only Lilith’s group took up all three storylines of virtual team, discussion group and teams in general. Melissa’s group took up the storyline of the virtual team. Thus, only Lilith’s team showed a deeper, richer movement into multiple storylines. Taken together, the self-reflection, “teams should” and learning community storylines may be more likely to lead to learning. The positioning of participants through speech acts as in agreement or as augmenting the ideas of others also reflects the group members’ meaning-making processes. We can make connections between the three perspectives and their storylines with traditional aspects of learning. The virtual team storylines, in which students position themselves in relation to the virtual characters, are a way of engaging at a concrete level. As students take up storylines of the online discussion group they begin to negotiate with each other the meaning of the scene itself. Finally, as students take up the storyline of “teams in general”, they begin to transfer some of what they are learning through this particular scene to their understanding of teams at a general level. Further work will explore which storylines, positions and acts are most likely to lead to the intended learning outcome as defined by the designers of this particular scene and whether we can identify the typical storylines taken up by students learning team process skills in order to use these storylines as a teaching tool for self-reflection.

**References**


