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Instant messaging and microblogging: Situated-learning platforms for educationists and workplace mentors

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Abstract

We explore how newcomers learn to socialize into the workplace through instant messaging and microblogging. Findings demonstrate that instant messaging can be one mechanism of learning the normative ways of 1) making calls and 2) shifting discussions between the online and offline, while microblogging can be another mechanism of learning the culture of 1) bantering humor and 2) social talk ignoring the physical official hierarchy. We conclude that it is the features of instant messaging and microblogging which characterize newcomers’ use in workplace learning, arguing that the instant messengers and microblogs can function as “situated-learning platforms” on the Internet in which people can learn and practice the normative ways of doing things simultaneously. We suggest that instant messaging and microblogging could be considered as “subjects to be learnt” for teachers and workplace mentors, rather than merely “tools for learning” for workplace newcomers.

Keywords: Instant messaging, microblogging, Facebook, workplace learning, computer-mediated discourse analysis

1. Workplace talk, learning and the Internet

Language and communication play important roles in the workplace in that work activities usually involve interaction among colleagues (e.g., Holmes and Stubbe, 2003; Arslan, Kutluca & Özpınar, 2011). Research has evidenced that colleagues can achieve transactional and/or relational goals by means of linguistic strategies in face-to-face encounters, such as the use of humor (Holmes, 2007) and social talk (Holmes, 2000). These uses are often cultural-specific and vary from workplace to workplace (Schein, 1984). Thus, new employees usually need to learn such norms so as to socialize into their new workplaces (Mak et al., 2012).

Owing to the development of information communication technology, the aforementioned workplace interactions have transferred onto the Internet (e.g., Herring, 2010), followed by the norms and the need to learning them. Yet, studies have barely touched on this interdisciplinary topic across linguistics, education and organizational studies. Seeing the emerging use of instant messengers (IM) (e.g., Cameron and Webster, 2005; Aboderin, Fadare & Kumuyi, 2012; Tavukcu, Gezer, & Özdamli, 2009) and microblogging (M-blogging) (e.g., Jackson et al., 2007) in the workplace, this study of discourse analysis aims to focus on how newcomers can acquire the linguistic norms to socialize into the workplace via IM in QQ Tencent and M-blogging in Facebook Status Updates. We provide...
insights into in what ways educationists and mentors can help teenagers and newcomers learn for better workplace communication and socialization through the two types of computer-mediated communication.

2. Framework and methodology

We mainly consider the workplace as communities of practice (CoP) in which colleagues rarely learn to become integral via pre-designed formal activities versus situated participation in informal activities (Wenger, 1998). Newcomers participate in everyday interactions, simultaneously partly or totally understanding the cultural norms shared by the existing CoP members (Blaka and Filstad, 2007). We also employ the media richness theory proposed by Daft and Lengel (1986) to account for how changing or shifting between the richer or less rich communication media can play a role in newcomers’ learning in IM and M-blogs.

We use the method of discourse analysis to analyze the extracts from a database of over 9,000 English wordIM talk from QQ Tencent, and over 80 M-blog posts (English mixed with Chinese) from Facebook Status Updates. Collected over a period of three months, the former IM data were from a business company, the latter M-blog data from an international chain restaurant. We conducted interviews focusing on providing contexts to the selected IM or M-blog talk, enhancing validity of inferences and learning points (Holmes and Stubbe, 2003). All names presented are pseudonyms; all photos and confidential contents are removed.

3. Data analysis

3.1. Instant messaging

“Sunshine” was a company constituted by three units: the Hong Kong team (mainly for wholesale), the Mainland China team (mainly for export trade), and the factory team (mainly for manufacturing). Colleagues did not frequently meet face to face but online or via phone calls. Brian was a new officer who had joined in the Hong Kong team for a month. His main duties included business development with the Mainland China team. John was an integral member in the Mainland China team. They usually communicated via QQ Tencent instant messenger and long-distance call.

According to interviews, younger colleagues (less than 35 years old) from different units of Sunshine usually used the Internet to have work-related talk which included electronic documents and numerical elements, such as code, money, quotations. In contrast, they preferred talking by phone for non-numerical topics, such as organization of business trips. Data reveal that Brian learnt some predominant communication norms via miscommunication, and in turn situated-practiced them in QQ Tencent:

3.1.1. Extract 1 – Coming to understand what time to make calls

_Context:_ Brian said Mr. Leung, his superior, asked him to print name cards without colleague names for temporary workers in an expo, and he asked John to help. Brian and John have argument later.

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>14:58:36</td>
<td>John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>14:58:56</td>
<td>Brian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>14:59:07</td>
<td>Brian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>15:03:02</td>
<td>John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>15:03:40</td>
<td>Brian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>15:03:47</td>
<td>Brian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
John: We don’t care who gives name cards, the problem is can you handle?

John: If customers find our company, you are not very familiar with export things. In addition, our team is more familiar with many quality requirements, certs, rules, and they can ask our factories.

Brian: Oh you worry this.

Brian: Then we can write your phone no. in the name cards.

John: Actually, I don’t understand why to use HK branch name, you don’t trust us?

Brian:Wa~

Brian:No no

Brian: Misunderstand me~

((Brian tries to explain the reason politely.))

John: I misunderstand you.

Brian: Never mind.

Brian: Really misunderstand.

John: Ok sorry.

Brian: Next time I call you @@.

Brian: My language is very bad.

((They talk about other tasks for the expo.))

Extract 1 indicates how Brian learns from miscommunication with John in the Mainland China Team. Whereas John has expressed his question about the unnamed name card (lines 1, 4), Brian chooses to talk via IM. After a few days, the conflict is further triggered but Brian still chooses to discuss it in IM (lines 7-19). When the misunderstanding is solved, Brian admits that he should have called John (lines 24-25). This can be considered as a critical point of coming to learn. Communication media which allow more natural language and emotions are richer than those which do not (Daft and Lengel, 1986). As Brian said in the interview, “afterward I notice that when we have arguments or emotions, phone is better than QQ”. This claim implies that he learnt that IM as a computer-mediated communication medium might not be as rich as phone calls when dealing with critical or emotional arguments.

3.1.2. Extract 2 – Learning to shift from instant messaging to long-distance calls

Context: Brian and John are talking about the minimal order and business progress with a customer.

14:18:39

Brian: [item number], what is the moq?

14:19:41

John: Who need?

14:19:49

Brian: Italian customer

14:19:53

Brian: [Some information with bullet points about what the Italian customer requires for the product.]

14:20:20

Brian: This is his required certs

14:21:00

John: Yes
Extract 2 displays how Brian practices shifting between IM and phone calls according to the CofP norms. From lines 1 to 14, Brian does work-related talk including copies of electronic information, item numbers and profits. He seems to get a good price for his friend, while John disagrees with this (lines 10-11). In line 15, Brian takes the initiative to suggest talking by phone. After the negotiation, they go back to the instant messenger to discuss tariff. In the interview, Brian reported that after a lot of misunderstandings scenes like extract one, he has “learnt when to make calls to have better communication orally, and when to talk white-and-black using QQ”. Once again, this claim can be explained by media richness theory. Brian seems to have learnt when to switch to use phone calls versus fully engaging in typing in IM; indeed, phone calls are theoretically richer than IM in that phone calls allow tone of voice, silence, loudness, pitch fluctuation, and the similar paralinguistic cues to transmit naturally, but not electronically (Daft and Lengel, 1986). But still, it is worth mentioning that they choose to talk about tariff and other numerical matters in IM. It seems that in this CofP, some kinds of business discussion are more appropriate to implement in a less rich medium, IM. This contradiction to the media richness theory can be explained by the understanding that sometimes it is the social processes and cultural reality surrounding media use, but not the media per se, which determine the appropriateness of media in the end (Markus, 1994). One domain seems to be the shared repertoire (communication norms) of the CofP. Perhaps learning to communicate in this CofP is not only an issue of media richness, but also of socio-cultural understanding.

3.2. Microblogging

“DIY” was a restaurant serving Italian cuisine. It contained a number of branches in Hong Kong. The research site was one of them. Sam was a new crew who had joined in the shop for a few months.
He was responsible for various cooking duties. According to interviews with two of his co-workers, their CofP swore in the kitchen due to work pressure, teased each other in Facebook beyond working hours, and talked without concerns about job titles online. Many colleagues were full-time university students around 20 years old. Data reveal that Sam learnt some norms of communication in this CofP by mimicking integral members:

3.2.1. Extract 3 – Getting used to the bantering culture

Extract 3 shows how Sam mimics the humor talk of an integral member to participate in bantering humor. Edmund, the manager, shows his gratitude for his subordinates’ hard work in Status Updates (lines 2-3), but Wilson, one of the subordinates, responds playfully by on behalf of all colleagues asking the manager to give them a treat (lines 4-5). Then, Sam mimics Wilson’s response by saying now he has relaxed, but in a slightly different way – he just says so on behalf of himself (line 6). In the interviews, Wilson maintained that teasing in Facebook is common for their team, and Sam said, “I see other people joke, so I joke too”. As a newcomer, Sam seems to follow integral members’ practice to socialize. It appears that learning the humor norms in this CofP works better in a less rich medium, Facebook Status Updates, than in face-to-face situations. Once again, some CofPs or members prefer the less rich media for particular purposes, or due to particular norms (Markus, 1994).

3.2.2. Extract 4 – Learning to ignore the physical official hierarchy

Extract 4 illustrates how Sam follows the social talk of other peer subordinates to sarcastically “encourage” the manager. Edmund complains about the long working hours for cutting pizzas (line 2); other colleagues, Jim and Mike, show no sympathy for him (lines 3 and 4). When Sam replies by saying “work for so long, much obliged”, he behaves as if he was the superior to comfort his subordinate (line 5). As Sam expressed in the interview, he “will not
say so face to face; after all he is the manager, but in Facebook it is okay”. This example further evidences that mimicking in Status Updates is a way for Sam to address the communication norms of his new workplace. Moreover, ignoring the official hierarchy is a kind of informal social acts which are regulated by individual workplace culture, rather than by the media richness in general (Ngwenyama and Arbor, 1997). It is again the CofP norms which subvert the media richness theory, and then allow Sam to learn and participate actively in Status Updates.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Our first participant, Brian, learnt what time to make calls and what time to talk in IM through his experiences of encountering miscommunication and of practicing the shift himself respectively. For the first aspect, in our example, the trigger was a relational and emotional argument. IM is seldom used for communicating too emotional or ambiguous messages (Cameron and Webster, 2007), because such abstract communication is prone to misunderstandings under the pressure of short turns and fast pace in IM (Chung and Nam, 2007). However, it might be this pitfall which allowed Brian to learn. Through the miscommunication experience, as he said, he realized the context to shift to call. In turn, as for the second aspect, it might be the functions of both synchronous and asynchronous communication of IM which allowed Brian to put what he learnt into practice. People use IM synchronously or asynchronously, depending on the topics of discussion and norms (Baron, 2004). While IM often runs with other tasks in the computer (Baron, 2004), since it is difficult to focus on single tasks in IM, people usually prioritize and separate their tasks or discussion of tasks in IM (Kinzie et al., 2005). Such prioritization and separation facilitated Brian to practice the shift between talking synchronously in IM and talking by other means, at the same time leaving all conversations in IM asynchronous (Issacs et al., 2002). Indeed, IM is functional in that it replaces or adds to other communication channels (Cameron and Webster, 2005); this is particularly beneficial to newcomers who learn to normatively shift to talk between different situations and media.

Our second participant, Sam, addressed the culture of bantering and ignoring the official hierarchy through (in) M-blogs. M-blogs are usually updated very frequently and contains much informal, personal sharing (Castro, 2009); M-blogs in Facebook Status Updates seldom exist in isolation but occur in short, simple and ongoing combinations with other people’s participation in the community (Page, 2010). Such characteristics of M-blogging fostered Sam’s learning of the CofP norms. Owing to the informal and personal nature of M-blogging, Sam could gradually address and interact with the culture of the CofP more easily and faster than in other media; because M-blogging includes intertwined interactions among many CofP members, Sam might find it easier to mimic the participation of other integral members, as he demonstrated. Because of the term of “friends” for all relationships, offline centralized relationships will become less hierarchical when the participants go to Facebook for social interaction (Lewis and West, 2009). This might also foster Sam’s socializing through learning the norms of ignoring physical hierarchy. Moreover, M-blogs allow people to track their own activities (Zhao and Rosson, 2009) and other people’s recent engagement (Page, 2010). This makes newcomers’ learning more comprehensive, traceable and recallable.

Owing to the above-mentioned features of IM and M-blogs, newcomers’ learning and practice often occur almost simultaneously in these platforms which are pervasive in many parts of the world. Thus, we infer that IM and M-blogs can function as “situated-learning platforms”, especially for teenagers and young adults who are entering new companies and undergoing socialization. Indeed, young people have larger acceptance for IM (Baron, 2004) and M-Blogs (DiMicco et al., 2008) than elderly. Because of the asynchronous and synchronous functions of IM, learners are free to undergo situated learning (learning and practicing at the same time) or traditional learning (learning before practice). Even in M-blogs, the updates or communication can be nearly synchronous. Therefore, for newcomers, IM and M-blogs can be seen as a platform for learning and practicing online communication or normative ways of doing things which are relevant to interpersonal Internet use. In addition, newcomers can often recap or review how they or their interlocutors have participated in these platforms, so that learning becomes more visible, aggregated, and reflective than traditional workplace learning. In consequence, IM and M-blogs themselves become localized, context-based, and concrete data pools of shared repertoire and sense of belonging in the CofP (Wenger, 1998), which is usually useful for newcomers who are uncertain about the new workplace culture. This is
particularly feasible in workplaces, such as those of customer services and catering, where newcomers do not have much room or time to stay with the integral members during office hours. Furthermore, IM and M-blogs are more traceable and visible than learning in traditional spoken contexts, but are less formal and individual than learning in traditional written contexts. They provide people with an alternative learning medium in which they do not learn in traditional spoken or written contexts, but in a new “written verbal context” without face-to-face contact and with word limit in each turn.

In addition to treating IM and M-blogs as “tools for learning” for newcomers’ who want to address workplace norms, they could be considered as “subjects to be learnt” for school teachers and workplace mentors as well. As our data evidenced, IM and M-blogs themselves can be with instructive and learning values. Educators and policy makers have proposed applied learning which encourages students to put what they learn at school into career-related experience. This is one important learning direction and outcome articulated in the senior secondary curriculum of many developed countries or cities, such as Hong Kong (Education Bureau, 2009). As Lombardi (2007) highlights as well, learning in the 21st century should be authentic with technologies, so teachers could consider instructional design with IM and/or M-blogs in classrooms, focusing on the potential authentic elements of workplace learning on the Internet. Alternatively, teachers could blend IM and M-blogs in a self-contained learning environment in which students are assigned into different workplace roles to simulate workplace problem-solving as a kind of task-based learning. Also, taking the informal role of teaching and guiding novices in the workplace, mentors transfer working skills, convey knowledge about management, and workplace norms (Swap et al., 2001). Therefore, mentors are advised to appropriately participate in IM and M blogging, interacting with newcomers to mold them into the CoP’s ways of talking and/or doing things on these platforms. As our data analysis suggested, both general media richness and CoP norms affect the use of IM, M-blogs, and other communication media in learning equivocal, uncertain business discussions. We suggest workplace mentors pay attention to the general and specific use of these media when training newcomers. We are now planning a longer period of data collection to investigate this phenomenon for more theoretical implications of the present study.

References


### Appendix A.

**A.1. Transcription conventions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Symbol</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>((The talk ends.))</td>
<td>Transcribers’ additional information in double round brackets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[item number]</td>
<td>Undisclosed contents in instant messaging in square brackets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chris</strong></td>
<td>Bold names indicate participants’ pseudonyms in microblogging</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>