Taking Sides in Virtual Debates: Social Knowledge Construction in an Online Discussion

Table 1. Phases of social knowledge construction in the Interaction Analysis Model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase I</td>
<td>Sharing and comparing of information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase II</td>
<td>The discovery and exploration of dissimilarity and inconsistency among ideas, concepts or statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase III</td>
<td>Negotation of meaning/co-construction of knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase IV</td>
<td>Testing and modification of proposed synthesis/co-construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase V</td>
<td>Agreement statement(s)/application of newly constructed meaning</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Distribution of phase of social knowledge construction by level of post

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Level 1</th>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phase I</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>29.2%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>34.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase II</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>50.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase III</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
<td>11.4%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase IV</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phase V</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>100.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Distribution of Level 2 posts by phase of social knowledge construction and type of post

Figure 2. Distribution of Level 1 posts by phase of social knowledge construction and type of post

**Findings**

- Most Level 1 posts reached Phase II in the IAM, few reached Phase III, and no Level 1 posts reached Phases IV and V (see Table 2).
- Level 2 posts are spread across more phases (see Table 2).
  - However, this depends on whether the post was an agreement response or a disagreement response (see Figure 1).
  - Agreement post: from someone on the same side of the debate.
  - Disagreement post: from someone on the opposite side of the debate (this was a requirement of the assignment).
- All Level 3 posts were of Phase III or higher, despite few posts at this level (see Table 2).

**Recommendations**

1. Online discussions give all students a voice and allow them to back opinions with logic and facts.
2. Online debates require students to confront opposing viewpoints and think carefully about how to respond and negotiate differences.
3. Require more, but shorter, discussion posts.
   - More posts should increase the development of social knowledge construction.
4. Require more high level posts in discussions.
   - Higher level posts reached higher phases of social knowledge construction.
5. Require more discussion posts in response to opposing views.
   - Social knowledge construction occurs when opposing views are confronted and negotiated.

**References**


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**The Assignment**

- Students participate in weekly debates over social issues related to the course.
- Students choose a side to defend.
- They argue for their side using relevant course material and outside sources.
- Students respond to classmates to engage in asynchronous discussions during the week.

**Assignment Tasks**

- Read both sides of the issue for the week from *Taking Sides: Clashing Views in Adolescence* and any supplemental material.
- Take the YES or the NO position and in about 150 words, respond to a question about an issue related to the course.
- Each activity is taken separately.

**Research Questions**

- Is there evidence of social knowledge construction in these discussions?
- How does the debate format contribute to social knowledge construction?

**Content Analysis & Methods**

- Coded using the Interaction Analysis Model (IAM), which separates knowledge construction into 5 phases (see Table 1). 2,3
- The IAM was developed using grounded theory and analysis of online debates. 2,4
- The unit of analysis is the individual post, each instance of students' cognitive activity is taken separately.
- Analysis of 71 posts from Week 2 of the course, debating: Do reality TV shows portray responsible messages about teen pregnancy?