DIRECTIONS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISCOURSE IN AN ONLINE MULTICULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

Marcelo Dorfsman
Hebrew University of Jerusalem (ISRAEL)

Abstract

This paper is the result of one academic year’s longitudinal study based on discussions that took place in seven online courses, as part of a blended learning academic program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The study’s aim was to identify and characterize developmental processes in online discussions, as well as to examine whether, and to what extent, an online environment influences the discourse development within a culturally diverse group.

This qualitative study entailed horizontal and vertical analyses of the discussion process, utilizing the micro-textual method, in order to identify the nature and development progress of the discussions. In the course of the study, four types of discourse were identified: personal-autobiographical, disciplinary, professional, and ethno-cultural. Moreover, four directions were identified in the progression of the discourse: discourse developing via antinomic pairs, discourse developing via technological aids, discourse developing in spiral fashion, and an evolving metacognitive discourse.

The findings suggest that the online environment is a fertile arena for creating an academic and multicultural learning context.

Keywords: development of discourse, pedagogical environment, online discussion.

1 INTRODUCTION

This study is the result of one academic year’s longitudinal study based on discussions in seven online courses, as part of a blended learning MA program at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem.

The study’s aim was to identify and characterize developmental processes – if any – in online discussions. A second goal was to examine whether, and to what extent, an online environment facilitates interaction between participants of different cultures, nationalities, and religions, and how this interaction expresses itself in the online discussion.

The study was conducted on an MA program commencing in March 2016, comprised of nineteen students from nine different countries. Seven online courses were taught over two semesters, in asynchronous fashion based on a pedagogical model in which each lesson’s focal point is a discussion group (forum). These semester-long courses either spanned fourteen weeks or were concentrated into a seven-week period. Each course included an online discussion group for addressing the course’s key issues on a weekly basis. This study is based on what took place there.

2 METHODOLOGY

This study was a qualitative one based on the micro-textual method [1]. The horizontal and vertical analysis employed in this method was helpful in identifying the nature and development of the discussions throughout the program. In this study, all the program courses’ online forums were examined and analysed: three courses in the first semester and four in the second.

The examination proceeded, in accordance with the micro-textual method, in three stages: the first stage entailed a vertical reading and analysis of the entire discussion, examining all the course forums throughout the semester. In this initial reading, content indicators – the personal, professional, disciplinary, and ethno-cultural identifiers – were primarily pinpointed. In the second stage, a second reading and analysis was conducted, both vertically and horizontally, mainly comparing parallel forums. At this stage, keywords and speech events were primarily identified. The third stage entailed in-depth analysis based on components found and their conceptualization of the research question.

Online discourse for all courses took place on Hebrew University’s “Moodle” platform, which allows for asynchronous dialog between participants. All names here are fictitious. Both students and lecturers were aware of the study being done and gave their permission.
The research question was: What are the primary characteristics of online discourse in online academic courses, and how can their development be characterized, if at all?

Sub-questions: How does the online environment promote multicultural dialogue among participants, if at all? How can we define the impact of the technological environment on online discourse?

3 RESULTS

3.1 The Nature of the Discourse

The first stage revealed four types of discourse: personal-autobiographical, professional, disciplinary, and ethno-cultural. Each, though unique in its own right, was connected to the other types in an evolving weave of multi-directional and multi-significant discourse. Below I will present and illustrate my findings: namely, the various types of discourse, their characterizations, and their connection to the multi-discourse weave.

Note: participants’ comments will be reproduced as written, without correcting for errors (apart from obvious spelling mistakes), to give an accurate sense of the language and style of the original posts.

3.1.1 Personal-Autobiographical Discourse

One highly prominent feature of the online discourse was the participants’ need to connect their message and statements to the world of their feelings and personal experiences. Significantly, this mostly occurred not as the result of a prior request or assignment from the moderator, but stemming entirely from the participant’s own choice. For example, in the “Contemporary Jewry” course, the topic of discussion was demographic issues and the Jewish experience in light of these. The assignment was:

In the light of the material presented in lesson 1 concerning the demographic changes that shook the Jewish world, what lessons have you learnt regarding the Jewish experience? Can you identify patterns concerning the Jewish experience or do you believe that all is uncertain?

Here, Helena’s response was to tell her family story: This lesson reinforced that this is my family’s story. We always knew that there was family who remained in various parts of Europe, yet my immediate family was not directly affected by the Shoah.

In another course, on “Text Teaching”, Lucy reinforces the topic – the changing of Abraham and Sarah’s names – by means of a personal example: …a first example I might use of characterization is actually a direct one. I named our daughter Ronit and our son Yonatan for exactly this reason — that they are described explicitly in Tanach…

Why do people feel the need to share their personal stories? The introduction of a personal perspective based in autobiographical materials contributes to understanding the content studied: …With no personal experience of severe repression and restriction in my lifetime, I feel totally inadequate to fully comprehend the depth of Russian Jewish experiences. (Ashley)

Sometimes, though, participants were asked explicitly to bring in life experiences, eliciting not only stories but also highly personal and emotional reactions, and fascinating insights: …Since about Grade 5 I have really hated the school environment, the idiotic rules, lack of power, abuse of power… (Sam)

Wow – was I lucky … Unlike at St Ryan’s, fear was not the operating factor – it was imbuing a love of the religion and culture (Helena).

The forum’s language, narrative by nature, propels it in the direction of personal story – allowing not only for the expression of opinions, ideas, and argument, but also for feelings such excitement, anger, or regret [2]. A personal story can convey learning difficulties or successes, or can illustrate the issue under discussion, in the same way as a picture is worth a thousand words. It also allows the sharing of professional and ethical positions in an atmosphere of trust and collegiality. In sum, the personal story transforms online discourse into an intimate teaching and learning space.

3.1.2 Disciplinary Discourse

Within academic discourse, disciplinary discourse is the “expected” type. The messages and statements aim to present the content studied – to analyze, and deepen it. The focus tends to be on
concepts, expressions, and/or sources. For example, in the “Text Teaching” course, the lecturer wished to discuss a particular textbook paragraph. The discussion unfolded as follows:

One of the exclusive messages in this unit invites the reader to rethink what it means to “get even”. The lesson teaches the students that if they are “smart” as opposed to “foolish” they will treat each other kindly and care for one another … (Lea)

In this case, because the child has feelings of revenge against someone who did something wrong to them, he or she is labeled as “foolish” … (Ashley)

One of this lesson’s objective is to explain the phrase “getting even” by focusing on Esau’s character … I was not comfortable with the terms “smart” and “foolish”… (James)

In this course, the discipline is teaching texts. Above, we see an interesting discussion in which two expressions, “smart” and “foolish”, are repeated throughout in reference to the act of “getting even”. This is an in-depth debate, conducted between professionals, on the discipline of education.

A similar example can be found in the “Israel Education” course, while discussing educational tourism:

This article compares and contrasts the educational school trip to the family trip, the Shoah trip, the vacation, and the pilgrimage trip …. (Samantha)

What is the Approach and Focus of the Piece? To emphasize the need to turn Israel trips from tourism to contemporary pilgrimage into true Israel Education by standardizing goals and programs... (Jenny)

.... Yitzhak and his staff turn tourists into pilgrims… (Helena)

Birthright focuses on a trip as a pilgrimage (they go to religiously significant places and pray), a heritage trip (learning about Jewish history and connecting it to the participants and as a rite of passage… (Maia)

The central theme is educational tourism as a form of pilgrimage, but the messages transition to the topic of heritage tourism. One characteristic of disciplinary discourse is indeed the transition between aspects, and the meanings given to the issue under discussion.

Discipline discourse thus appears to be a profound, evolving, and fluctuating discourse: students discuss the focal points interesting them, yet also allow themselves to switch focus to another point. Disciplinary discourse often relies on sources: whether from that particular course, from the lecturer’s lesson or from another student. As can be seen in the examples, personal or professional references might be present – the difference lies in the purpose of the discussion space: to engage in analysis of concepts and ideas located at the course’s core.

3.1.3 Professional Discourse

A third type of online discourse is professional discourse [3]. This includes all the messages in which participants relate to the role of the teacher and to teaching in general. In contrast to personal discourse, professional discourse arises at times as part of the forum’s mission and at other times initiated by a participant. In the following message from the “Israel Education” course, for example, we witness an argument over the professional aspect of the teacher’s ethical position: should s/he be neutral or, on the contrary, express a clear position?

Jenny, I totally agree after reading this. I think these critical thinking ideas are great, but critical thinking, at least in my mind, must remain neutral … (Samantha)

Real-life school problems are mentioned too: … In order to allow Israel curriculum to be part of the teaching in the school, we first need to find time in the school day, designate specific amount of time in the course of a day/week/semester. (Lea)

In another course, on the philosophy of Levinas, while discussing “religion for adults”, one participant could not ignore the issue that truly sparked her interest: I think Levinas’ adult religion, as I perceive it, is what should be taught to kids in Hebrew school at a young age, especially in the Diaspora… (Samantha)

The forum is also a space for participants to share experience and resources: To make these skills accessible to my students, I might use a work of William Shakespeare to draw literary parallels to (and characterization analysis with) biblical stories. (Lucy)

... I know it is not directly connected, but here is MAKOM Program introducing a very interesting approach using their Matrix, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KAqoxiSVfQ) … (James)
In sum, professional discourse is one in which participants cooperate and share resources, state positions, put their experience and perspectives to the test by the group, and announce their successes and failures. Unlike in autobiographical discourse, professional discourse is based on ethical knowledge and attitudes, not only on experiences and feelings; but since many of the participants are education professionals, it inevitably includes personal discourse to a certain degree, whenever participants insert themselves into the discussion as living examples of that discourse.

3.1.4 Ethno-cultural Discourse

In an online course whose participants hailed from different countries, cultures, and religions, I identified a fourth discourse type that I termed “ethno-cultural discourse”, in which students connect the existing discourse – personal, professional, and disciplinary – to a discourse that attests to their affiliation to a culture, religion, or nationality [4, 5].

For example, in the “Text Teaching” course, participants watch a video about Abraham and the angels.

The first question is regarding the theological assumptions that are present in this video. It seems pretty clear to me that the main message was if you trust in God then everything will be ok …

The second theological assumption from the video is that Jesus came from Abraham due to the fact that Abraham believed in God’s promise (Ben).

Ben’s remark is of the disciplinary discourse type, and concerns the basic assumptions of an educational video. Lea then contributes a professional comment regarding methods of “God Education”:

Hey Ben! I definitely agree with your last point and actually wrote something similar in my comment. I wanted to add a third possible outcome to teaching God in this way.

Daniel, a Christian student, adds: The first character introduced is that the LORD visited Abraham. In the Hebrew this is the tetragrammaton of Yod, Hey, Vav, Hey. My personal opinion is that this was a pre-incarnate appearance of Yeshua.

Under other circumstances, we might categorize this as disciplinary discourse. But Daniel does not say, as Ben does, that Jesus “came” from Abraham, but speaks in his own voice about a “pre-incarnate appearance”, a different sort of statement. It is clearly not just a routine statement; it represents for Daniel an essential existential and religious belief, characterizing his participation in the program.

The same issue can sometimes be perceived differently, depending on one’s circles of belonging. For example, when the subject arises of the role of teacher and the place of “truth and reverence” and the tensions experienced, Lea (a Jewish student) observes: I think it when it comes to truth and reverence it’s all very personal and as an educator it’s important to address that, and help each student make their own meaning of it. Personally, I think it really depends on how we define truth.

Daniel says: There should be no tension for the educator when one is rightly handling the Word of God. In Bible education, is not the educator, but rather the Spirit of God who reveals truth.

As a final – rather impressive – example of this type of discourse, I will quote an announcement Daniel made to his fellow participants in the “Contemporary Jewry” course: As a Christian, I am embarrassed, and deeply ashamed for the Christian part of persecution of Jews in history. This is something we will answer to God for. I firmly believe that those who have persecuted the Jewish people will have to give account for their actions against His people...

Lea’s equally impressive response: Hey Daniel! I can really connect to this sentiment. If I didn’t feel I had a personal connection with God, a lot of “Jewishness” would be lost on me. Not to say that my actions towards others around me doesn’t also include an element on godliness … It does. But I think I would have a much harder time keeping up with my faith if it wasn’t for my everlasting relationship with God.

In sum, ethno-cultural discourse is not an “independent” discourse but is introduced at any given moment to the existing discourse. Ethno-cultural discourse adds to both personal and professional discourse, expanding the discussion space by granting it a dimension of identity, belonging, and commitment to the group. It will appear as an additional dimension in online discourse when the group comes from different worlds and cultures, transforming routine discourse into multicultural discourse [6, 7].
3.2 The Progress of the Discourse

In the previous sub-section, we described four types of discourse, and thus addressed the first part of the research question posed at the start. An analysis of these types allows us to present four directions in the development of online discourse, as follows: discourse developing via antinomic pairs, via technological aids, in spiral fashion, and evolving metacognitive discourse. The directions of discourse are based in part on Litwin’s work [8].

We have seen already that, within any given discussion, we can identify the development of discourse, where the “milestones” for doing so are the prominently featured keywords [9]. These are words repeating in various ways throughout the discussion and serving as connecters within the discourse and as an indication of the type of direction developing. We also found that each direction constitutes a complex narrative weave, constructed from a combination of different types of discourse.

3.2.1 Discourse Developing Via Antinomic Pairs

One common direction is discourse that develops through antinomic pairs. The keyword connects to its opposite, thus creating an “antinomic pair”. Participants tend to “jump” between pairs of concepts, opposite in meaning, and through them expand the discussion. For example, in the fourth forum of the “Contemporary Jewry” course, the assignment was: Compare these two texts that were both written in the same year (1967) and are commentaries on the new reality. (The two texts are Layton and Amichai).

For purposes of illustration, I will note in bold the message titles, exemplifying the pairs that emerged.

The discussion begins with an analysis of the content of the two poems, and these are the pairs: Israeli vs. Diaspora/ Past and Future/ Tone and Vision.

The discussion gradually shifts to the authors’ language, perceptions, and identity, with titles: Two Different Languages/ Two Opposing Perspectives/ Centers of Identity.

It ends with pairs that seem to return to the starting point, quite similar to the first pairs: From Here to There/ Diaspora vs. Land of Israel/ To Live in the Present or Live in the Past.

Keywords in the discussion were: Future, Language, Identity.

The antinomic pairs are replaced as the discourse progresses, giving it meaning. We can state that throughout the course of the discussion, whose goal is to compare two literary works, a complex narrative structure develops out of the different types of discourse regarding the Diaspora/Israel issues on the one hand, and the past-present and future on the other.

3.2.2 Discourse Developing Via Technological Aids

The “Philosophy of Israel Education” course develops throughout an entire semester via a weekly online discussion. In the sixth week, the main topic is discrimination in Israeli society against the Mizrahi community. To facilitate this, the lecturer offers a comparison between three singers, brings a text that relates to one of them, and then opens the discussion. The clips are:

- Elvis Presley, “Hound Dog” (1956): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1lzQ8GDBA8s
- Paul Simon, “Diamonds on the Soles of her Shoes” (1986): http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-I_T3XvzPaM

The text is: http://www.elvis-history-blog.com/elvis-racism_2.html

The discussion progresses and succeeds in involving participants, both on the level of personal experiences and in disciplinary and professional insights. Additionally, we find people frequently being assisted by technological aids. Already in the second post, Hagit writes: This topic is very relevant for me because I am a mizrachi jew and definitely witnessed some of the injustices that the zionist narrative imposes on mizrachi people through my family … I really enjoy this tv show that highlights the experience of mizrachi jews in modern day Israel.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCsTC8PkcU

After three posts, Danielle brings text with a picture of a musical band, with the title of the post being “From Idan Raichel to A-Wa”. There, she tells the class about this band, and says: Here are a few
excerpts: “Just days after its release, the band’s music video was featured as “Video of the Day” on the popular online forum Muslim Hipsters. The coverage of A-Wa in French-language media has attracted online listeners from Lebanon and Morocco…

In order to eliminate any shadow of a doubt, at the end she answers Hagit: PS - Thanks again Hagit for sharing your story and sending us the link of the Neviim series, which I have fully watched. I was speechless. To those of you who are interested, it is a very interesting complement to the class: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLCIZIrF3msfdRixt0gPk0DGo_.Qm2nvEb

In the next post, Lucy writes a title in Hebrew (a rare occurrence – the rest of the discussion and the titles are all in English. Her title means “In every language.”)

Bekhol Lashon: There were many points to talk about this lesson! I will follow-up with Lea’s post, though. My family and I are going to Los Angeles in a few days for Pesach … The Occidental/Oriental orientations and divide continues to be a source of tension in the area. The local Jewish newspaper wrote about the divisiveness:

http://www.jewishjournal.com/dr_emranis_mystic_healing/item/is_your_school_too_persian_is_beverly_hills_too_jewish (2014) (...)

We foster an expanding Jewish community that embraces its differences.

http://www.bechollashon.org/about/mission.php

As a result of the discussion amongst participants, Lea sends Lucy her email, so that they can meet up when she arrives in Los Angeles.

And as the discussion draws to a close, Shaila writes: Keeping the diversity of peoplehood theme in mind, I would like to share another video appropriate within the forum topic: Idan Raichel Project MiMaamakim w English Translation: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQSJVsphUnY

I believe this music track demonstrates an interesting blend of cultural diversities that is a reality in Israel today as does this CD: http://www.jewish-music.huji.ac.il/content/oh-lovely-parrot-jewish-womens-songs-kerala

This discussion is taking place around Pesach time, and aside from the season’s greetings and blessings, Lucy posts this: As seen on Facebook: Y Dadoun shared ארצנו יבריאו מרכז אירופי video.

Following this, she herself shares several musical links with the group:


In conclusion, this discussion also developed progressively, with the main topic being how Israeli society deals with racism in general and discrimination against the Mizrahi community in particular. Keywords such as identity, pluralism, and “hybrid” contribute to the development of discourse but, as in the previous direction, the main issue remains in the forefront [9].

This discussion was characterized by greater use of technological aids (links to texts, images, and YouTube videos). The discussion contained many personal, professional, and ethno-cultural touches, but the technological component introduced in the lecturer’s assignment was a basic axis around which the discussion revolved, right up until the final post. This direction is very characteristic of online
discussion, and highlights the central role of the technological environment [10, 11]. Its use by the lecturer, with the participants following suit, reveals more about the relationship between lecturer and group, as well as illustrating the potential of this resource in facilitating online discussions.

3.2.3 Discourse Developing In Spiral Fashion

The third direction is discourse developing in spiral fashion. Here, a clear link is evident between the discourse on the one hand and the content theme and progressive expansion influenced by different types of discourse on the other. I will treat each extension as a “touch”, where the touches are as follows: disciplinary (e.g. when a participant combines existing knowledge with disciplinary knowledge from outside the course); personality (e.g. relating the discussion to experience, feeling, and/or personal opinions); professionalism (e.g. relating the discussion to classroom work); and ethnoculturalism (e.g. when the discussion is linked to religious, cultural, or national issues).

In the second forum of the course on Levinas, the assignment is: What, for Levinas, is a religion for non-adults and what is a religion for adults? What do you think of Levinas’ idea of adult religion?

The central issue in the ensuing discussion is an analysis of the concept of religion for adults in Levinas’ philosophical thought. Throughout the discussion, participants contribute to the subject from different directions and enable the narrative texture to develop through various touches of discourse. Helena opens with a professional touch: His proposal to reinvent Jewish education to promote deeper levels of rabbinic and Talmudic text study, is an elitist version of education that would not appeal to the children nor the masses .... Although this type of character and value education has become extremely important in today’s schools, I believe that the text study Levinas calls for would only be accessible to adults.

Maia returns to the core issue: I’m not sure if I fully understand this concept in its entity, but it seems that Levinas’ idea of religion for adults does not leave much room for pluralism. And he is, of course, entitled to that opinion, though I’m sure that many disagree with him.

Sam reinforces the central issue, and thus the discourse continues to develop and expand: Not a superstitious mode of thinking. Not mysterious. Promotes universalism, that is, it is available to anyone regardless of merit or genetics.

Danielle expands the discussion on the issue of responsibility and brings a personal touch: I think Levinas sees Judaism as a religion for an adult when we see it as the radical acceptance of infinite responsibility to the other, and not the framework for religious enthusiasm ... At Limmud UK, I met Mutasim Ali, who is the only person to whom Israel granted the status of refugee last year ...

Lea voices criticism of Levinas’ approach: I think Levinas’s idea of adult religion is dangerous. Even though I believe there are a lot of very interesting questions that arise from his philosophy which are absolutely debate-worthy, to rule out the mystical and solely faith-based aspects of Judaism ...

Daniel answers her, introducing the ethno-cultural touch with his approach and his faith: Can’t rituals also become dangerous idolatry? Not because of our obedience to God’s commandments, but rather in the danger of performing them without pursuing to know God more intimately? ... I question how one can love God without having a personal relationship with Him and understanding that He loves us enough to involve Himself in our daily walk on earth.

The discourse continues to develop, and along comes another touch, this time the professional one: I think Levinas’ adult religion, as I perceive it, is what should be taught to kids in Hebrew school at a young age, especially in the Diaspora. (Samantha)

And a revealing personal statement is made by a student admitting to learning difficulties: The text of Levinas proves very difficult for me as having no background knowledge to comprehend. Only after reading Everyone’s post did I come to have a little bit understanding of his concept. (Ashley)

As the discussion draws to its close we see that the original issue is still very much on the table: The message from this Parsha is clear: One can not love God at the expense of man, for if he does, then he does not really love God. We must take care and continuously strive to make both our relationship with God and our relationships with our fellows the very best that they can be. (Ben)

This final message, which received positive responses, summed up the discussion.

In conclusion, this discussion developed in a spiral fashion – meaning that its nucleus extended outwards via by various touches of personal, professional, disciplinary, and ethno-cultural discourse.
Throughout the discussion, participants contributed to the issue and expanded it in various ways, contributing to the construction of the narrative texture in the online environment.

3.2.4 Evolving Metacognitive Discourse

The final direction is evolving metacognitive discourse. I noticed this direction in one of the courses, and identified research and pedagogic value in it. In Forum 12 of the “Renewal of Practice in Israel Education” course, the main theme was the encounter (“mifgash”). The assignment was:

**Accounting for the Power of the Mifgash:** Please share with your fellow students what you believe to be the special power of the mifgash as a practice of Israel education. If you have participated in such a mifgash yourself, please do reflect on that experience so that others in the group can gain a sense of the force of such experiences. I encourage you to probe one another’s comments so that we might dig deep into what has become a core practice for the field.

In this, the final discussion of the course, the lecturer encourages participants to connect the concept of “mifgash” with their personal experience. In other words, personal-autobiographical discourse is deliberately encouraged so as to explore this concept – a pivotal practice in the field of Israel Education – in depth. In the discussion, after claiming she lacks personal experience, Danielle “substitutes” disciplinary discourse, quoting Buber (who appears on the program curriculum).

Adam Stewart mentioned Buber in his paper which made me think of the I-Thou relationship. Buber speaks about it as the highest form of dialogue. I believe modeling a good mifgash means creating the framework for such an exchange to happen, with mutual curiosity and deep respect. (All of this is speculation since I have not been part of an explicit Israel education mifgash myself…)

An interesting conversation develops around the question of physical versus virtual mifgash:

To me, social media cannot replicate the love that is required for mifgash to be effective (Daniel).

Social media has provided many ostracized people with a community for the first time (Sam).

Good thoughts Sam! We share the same need for direct human contact, but as you rightly point out, FB has a place for some (Daniel).

The discussion continues with stories of personal experiences by participants of various programs, or descriptions of mifgashim and their connection to the main article (Stewart). In the course of this discussion, issues connected to identity also arise: Am I the Israeli or the American in the Mifgash? While I moved to Israel for Zionist reasons, it was never to become “Israeli”, and while I served in the army, speak the language and have a passport, I’m very cognizant that my citizenship or my IDF service still doesn’t make me feel Israeli. So how can I serve as the Israeli in the Mifgash. (Brad)

Next came two or three stories about mifgash and personal experiences, until the final post, by Ben:

**This Course as a Mifgash.** While reading Stewart’s description of the Mifgash as well as the comments below, it occurred to me that this entire course could be described as a Mifgash experience. This course through the forum posts as well as our intensive summer semester in Jerusalem has given us the opportunity to meet and get to know “real life Israelis”. Whether they are natives like James and Lisa or American implants such as Brad, myself and Lea … As Stewart explained the power of the Mifgash is derived from authenticity … This has also been my experience in the course. My fellow students come from literally all over the world, this experience has given me the ability to meet them and to develop a relationship with them in a truly authentic and meaningful way.

Here, the participant sums up the issues raised during the discussion in the form of a metacognitive reflection – a reflective recapping of the experience of the course, which invites the others to enter the same discourse. He speaks about the course as an encounter, physical and virtual; connects his explanation to theory (the text authored by Stewart); discusses the participants’ identities and the program’s contents; and refers to authenticity, to meaning, and to mifgash, the discussion’s keyword. This post, one of the course’s most popular, received six positive and validating responses. The power of this direction lies precisely in its metacognitive quality. The student summarizes the discussion topic through collective experience, thereby allowing both those who have not experienced the mifgash and those who have to gain a shared understanding of the issue.

In the course of the discussions, we quite often found students expressing difficulty with understanding texts, due to lack of personal experience, as occurred here in Danielle’s initial post. These students always found ways to overcome the difficulty – whether through “adoption” of others’ experience, or
turning instead to theoretical content. In this case, a discussion that begins with a student’s difficulty ends with a metacognitive discourse that bears for that student, and indeed all who struggle to understand due to lack of personal experience, the message: “You too have attended a mifgash: this very program itself! Reflect on this and you will be able to deeply grasp its significance as I do!”

The evolving metacognitive direction is intended to overcome the different types of discourse – here, specifically personal discourse – to become part of a significant narrative weave for forum participants.

4 CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, I posed the following research question: What are the primary characteristics of online discourse in online academic courses, and how can their development be characterized, if at all?

In the results section, I described the characteristics of the discourse in the academic courses studied, categorizing four types of discourse: the personal-autobiographical, the professional, the disciplinary, and the ethno-cultural. In addition, I portrayed four directions in the development of online discourse, and in this way addressed the second part of the question.

The research sub-questions were: How does the online environment promote multicultural dialogue among participants, if at all? How can we define the impact of the technological environment on online discourse?

The findings cited here suggest that an online environment facilitates, in a variety of ways and corresponding to the issues under discussion, the development of an ethno-cultural discourse as an inseparable part of the narrative weave of each discussion [6, 12]. Additionally, one of the central insights gained following data analysis was that the technological environment is transformed into a space in which the narrative texture takes on life in different ways, built, in principle, from four types of discourse: the personal-autobiographical, professional, disciplinary and ethno-cultural [13, 14]. This narrative weave constitutes an intimate and reliable multi-discourse space existing between the participants – one in which they can comfortably conduct, and allow themselves to become involved in, a discussion.

This weave holds epistemological and pedagogical benefits. The epistemological dimension enables us to understand the discourse complexity, its composition and its characteristics. In addition, the weave and its scope bring into being and influence various discourse directions that develop during discussions. The pedagogical benefit lies in the fact that understanding the weave and its complexity may conceivably prove useful for lecturers when engaged in course development and teaching.

In this study, I chiefly dealt with the narrative structure of the discussions, the construction of discourse, and the directions of its development. Future research might focus on how online discourse is moderated, styles of moderation, and the development of a pedagogic typology that can shed light on the role of the facilitator in a multicultural online environment.

REFERENCES


