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Can Dialogic Narratives and Discourse Engage Online Learners?

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This research gathered data from eight online courses to assess if dialogic narratives improved student interactions and retention in those courses. The framework was based on Bakhtin's theory of dialogism grounded in the semiotic concepts of dialogic narratives (Bakhtin, 1931, 1985, 1986). Dialogic narratives were encouraged in all eight of the online courses to encourage and enlist discussions and nurture students individually and as communities of learners. The research question posed was: Can dialogic narratives be included in course discussion links of online courses, and if so, could they promote deeper engagement of online learners? The study reviewed eight undergraduate online classes of 113 students at a large university that implemented dialogic narratives over course of two years, through spring of 2019, to see if students could engage, actively participate, and complete these courses. The theoretical context or the study utilized a semiotic theoretical framework to demonstrate if and how dialogic narratives conveyed contextual information, elements of semiotic online course design, and focused on socio-cultural practices, to study how these factors could affect student learning. Using a Bakhtinian analysis, the semiotic enhancements of dialogic narratives were reviewed in each of the eight online courses and learner interactions observed and documented. The results were surprising: in all eight courses the semiotic enhancements were found to be interactive and effective. Dialogic narratives helped students to participate more actively in their online courses than simply responding to assigned discussions. The findings also revealed high completion rates for students enrolled in those online courses.

Does narrative discourse engage online learners?

The Covid 19 pandemic thrust most educational institutions and their learners into online learning through 2020 and onward into the future. While many teachers and faculty were reticent or fearful to go online, they had an obligation to make the online learning experience across grades and disciplines a more familiar and supportive one for both reluctant and experienced online learners. This study reviewed eight online undergraduate classes, 113 students, whose teacher also served as researcher, who used dialogic narratives over the fall of 2017 through spring of 2019, to see if they could engage and actively enlist students to

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participate in and complete these courses. Using a Bakhtinian analysis, the online course semiotic enhancements of dialogic narratives reviewed, and online learner interactions were observed and found to have been very interactive and effective. The findings of the study revealed the courses' successes could provide beneficial lessons for designers and instructors.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework utilized to undergird the study of elements of semiotic online course design can affect course design and student learning by revealing the importance of socio-cultural practices, tools, and dialogic narratives on learners. A Bakhtinian analysis applying Bakhtin's concept of dialogism in relation to self and others, posed that nothing stands alone in the universe; everything gets its meaning from dialogic relations (Bakhtin, 1931,1986). He posed that dialog acquires a relationship…to the ongoing events of current life in which we … are intimately participating" (1931).

An overview of eight online courses using dialogic narrative tools helped students and faculty to establish a common vocabulary as they engaged in their course activities. The resulting theoretical framework provided an in-depth account of the design method and took into consideration: (1) the academic culture, and (2) the culture of social practice.

Fischer (2005) emphasizes social practice in building reflective design communities, rather than a community of practice; he emphasizes "communities of interest" in which all stakeholders in the design process participate. Once rules were established, these guided how meaning was made and how the framework design could be implemented utilizing the practice of semiotic design and how these practices could be more valued and nurtured.

To Bakhtin, meaning is made through dialogue in a heteroglossic, or multi-voiced world. As a result of the existence of multiple languages and voices "there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 426). Bakhtin used the term "dialogism" to describe this phenomenon, or the idea that meaning is constructed in dialogue. "Speech is half ours and half-someone else's.... It is not finite; it is open ... and able to reveal ever new ways to mean" (p. 345-346).

Literature review

Semiotics has described human learning arising from signs subjectively interpreted through their own past, their culture and experience to explain human affect and cognition. Semiosis, that is, learning as the action of signs across culture and nature, develops semiotic consciousness and competence (Deely and Semetsky, 2017). Affective semiosis occurs quickly, immediately and recursively yet remains unconscious (Salvatore and Venuleo, 2008). Salvatore and Venuleo described affective semiosis with a dialogic sensemaking model in which the interpreter through interpreting a sign establishes the relationship between the sign and other signs. Hence, context strongly influences affective sensemaking because it places human social interaction within semiotic interpretative activity. Affective semiosis produces the emerging and mediative experience of reality (Salvatore and Venuleo, 2008).

Semiotics and discourse

Every utterance has an evaluative contextual meaning emanating from shared cultural presuppositions; discourse unconsciously and ubiquitously enacts social frames and shared belief systems within all human interactions (Danesi, 2015). Hence, online course

communications activate the learner's social frames generated by their cultural presuppositions.

> Learning unfolds continuously as a human perceives a sign, recognize(s) it as familiar. or unfamiliar, understand(s) the context in which it is displayed, and subsequently. arrive(s) at a 'dialogic understanding,' incorporating evaluation and agreement or disagreement. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 159).

Bakhtinian semiotics has been proposed as the foundation for a dialogic pedagogy to help teachers teach and to foster student learning (Stewart, 2010). Bakhtin suggested that a form of discourse, dialogic reflexivity, fosters the learner's reflection upon the text at hand and that dialogism described how everyone's world was a reaction to others' words, a process that began with mastering speech through assimilating other's words and culminating with assimilating the wealth of human culture (Bakhtin, 1986).

Bakhtin proposed that actions precede human understanding and subsequent reaction: active-dialogic understanding of disagreement/agreement in which "the hearer or reader places the words in dialogic context to evaluate its depth and universality" (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 159). He posed that discourse, both spoken and written, was dialogic, in a chain of communication existing among others on the same theme and of contradictory opinions, points of view, and value judgments (Bakhtin, 1935/1981). In fact, he posed that the meaning-making process was inherently dialogic. Bakhtin also knew that readers or participants wanted to be presented with a communication framework that offered them information that was culturally recognizable. This could raise problems however, if the dialog participants were not from the same culture because, if not, it would benefit them more to have prompts or clues, signposts, shared narratives, to direct them to meanings that were mutually understandable.

The same holds true for students; they want to be presented with a communication framework they can understand, that is culturally recognizable. In classroom environments, communication frameworks stem from instruction emanating from teachers and curriculum provided by the school or university. While educational systems have moved toward learner-centered instruction, educational formats of online curricula are largely delivered via learning management systems (LMS) with teachers monitoring and moderating module discussions in those online courses. Without concerted and ongoing efforts of teachers to keep the discussions flowing, the online discussions can remain static, teacher-directed, and monologic, so teachers often must work to find ways to be more interactive and culturally relevant with their students. It can be challenging in traditional classrooms to find ways to prompt communication that is dialogic and synergistic, but it is particularly taxing in online learning environments. In those venues, too often teachers assigned to teach the online courses are relegated to monitoring and making sure students are logging-in and posting in the courses. If teachers are not diligent to present interesting approaches to enlist students' involvement, the risk of student languor, frustration, or even alienation, could proportionately grow with each course module.

Since there has been such a rapid need for increased online instruction, it is more important than ever to be sure that all students have the resources available to help them better access and take part in their new online course materials. While the challenges of the digital divide also remain, however, particularly for underserved student populations who have difficulties of access, there also the are the difficulties of navigating the course software and taking part

in predesigned, 'canned,' courses with text that may prove more perplexing than for more experienced online students.

While online courses can be challenging for many students, students of diverse ethnic backgrounds currently represent the highest attritions from online courses (Bustamante, 2019; Gannon Cook, 2016; Jeffrey, et al, 2011; Park, et al, 2009, 2011; Paul, 2013; Xion, and Ching, 2010). There may be some initial factors that deter participation worthy of exploration, for example, cultural differences that keep them from readily comprehending online content. (The content materials may be written with unfamiliar terms and meanings that do not interface with the students' cultural knowledge base).

Introducing a schematic narrative template, where a thematic template is established, can convey both a story and meaning, is "like a clear window; it is something through which one views the world without realizing it there…we are using it as (a) cultural tool…the same story over and over with different characters, making the basis for collective memory, collective narratives" (Erstad and Wertsch, 2008, p.20, 29).

Research interventions, such as meaningful and timely instructor feedback, has been purported to be one of the best practices that can facilitate online learning (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Boston, Ice, Gibson, 2010; Gannon-Cook, Sutton, 2013). But other issues, such as, cognitive load, could also affect online learners because, according to cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1994); frustration can thrust short term memory into cognitive overload, cause stress, and impede learning. Students who are comfortable with social media, texting and using software like Facebook and Twitter, can struggle negotiating online courses (Jeffrey, et al, 2011; Paul, 2013; Xion, and Ching, 2010, Gannon Cook and Ley, 2020).

Semiotic tools, like dialogic narratives, could offer students prospects by helping them to become more involved in their online courses. These tools could give them opportunities for participation in open discussions, creating more open texts and inviting them to share their own cultural narratives.

Interpreting narrative texts was the focus of a study by Juzwik (Juzwik et al, 2008) which centered on the successful enlistment of elementary students participating in narrative discussions and texts. Juzwik's prior research looked at best practices for generating open discussions, increasing buy-in, and encouraging ongoing student participation in traditional classroom courses. From this study of the use of dialogic narratives in prior classroom courses, I sought indicators of how these inclusions could encourage students' participation in online courses. I applied similar indicators in online courses to see if similar results could be obtained. Juzwik posed that people often think of oral narratives as being stories of personal experience, but there are a range of types of experiences. Building on the work of Bakhtin (1935, 1981), Juzwik suggested that narrative genres could become dialogic resources as they respond to prior talk and anticipate subsequent narratives. His study indicated that narratives more frequently occurred in clusters, like group discussions, than alone, and often occurred in series connected to narratives. Vicarious narratives "included events about the lives of family members, friends, neighbors, and from events from television shows… and literary texts" (p.1132). Of all the narratives told as part of the online classes, over 75% of the narratives were shared personal experiences. By asking open-ended questions, sharing narratives, and encouraging feedback, I built dialogic narratives strategically into the teacher-as-researcher's instructional plans. Narratives were primed by probes with students that asked authentic teacher questions and questions that began with generic inquiries guiding the student to

relevant course content. Eventually, students felt comfortable enough to self-nominate personal narratives. Dialogic engagement seemed to result in "narrative tellings" (p.1147).
Britsch (2020) traces the interaction of multimodal semiotic resources in a science unit of an eighth-grade sheltered science classroom. She used two discourse narratives simultaneously to present differently motivated signs. The teacher discourse she included cued students to read the class materials in a way that related to their cultures, so they became engaged using the enlisted cultural cueing and participated in the teacher's discourse. She scaffolded discussion topics to help students build their confidence, then by shifting emphasis later in the course to requiring students enact their conceptual identity through written language. Britsch consistently undergirded her discourse with expectations for a learning trajectory that was more open; she did not explicitly link key language with students' investigative activity. The results indicated that her narrative design, while only being able to link students' science activity to the concept of surface tension using the science language, helped the students to progress further than they would have without those interventions.

This study seemed very timely in view of the recent increase of online course curricula and courses. The ongoing effects of the Covid 19 pandemic had also brought about increased fallout of students, both in absenteeism and attrition. The decline of academic achievement during summer 2020 was well documented (Heinrich, et al, 2020; Kuhfeld, 2019, Kuhfeld & Tarasara 2019; Kuhfeld, Condron, & Downey, 2019; Kurtz, 2020; Liebowitz, Porter, 2020). In addition, data of some states within the United States revealed a one-month loss of skills acquired during the school year. It was also acknowledged, that this could have further contributed to a widening gap between low and high achieving readers in K-12 environments (Colorado Department of Education)).

One instrumental case study (Pennell, 2020) explored an online summer class for adolescent readers labeled as struggling. The two educators as teachers and action researchers observed eleven summer school students. Their sources of data included interviews, audio recordings, field notes, and artifacts, in addition to online observations. They utilized an Interaction Analysis Model (IAM), to investigate the students' online discussion posts and they inserted several generic semiotic prompts to stir the discussions they hoped would resonate with students' cultural experiences. These were called "the Playground prompt, the Brainstorming prompt, and the Focal prompt", each of which was implemented at different stages in the online classrooms to assess impact on student knowledge construction. The Focal prompt required students to choose an argument and support their stance with a rationale and this prompt activity proved to be the most effective in encouraging knowledge construction among the students. They also encouraged students' construction of concept maps to review concepts the students learned. One of the findings that was apparent was that the form of the question affected not only the response, but the extent and quality of the responses within a discussion. While the study was small, the authors suggested the study might be replicated and used by teachers and curriculum designers to create an online experience that enlisted and enhanced student knowledge in the online classroom.

Online learning challenges

Online LMS, also called course management systems (CMS), like any other technology, have an inherent purpose built into their design and, therefore, a built-in pedagogy. Studies about CMS tend to focus on their ease of use, their application, and their providers' intentions. Few discuss the ways in which they influence and guide pedagogy. These systems are created by the university instructional designers and usually cannot be

modified by course instructors unless the instructor is a part of the instructional design team. In addition, it is also worth noting that there is a distinction between a teacher experienced in instruction and one experienced in instructing online. The term novice instructors would not seem to apply to most online instructors, yet a number are novices when it comes to teaching online. Few instructors are consciously aware that CMS design is influencing their pedagogy.

The term "silo" depicts a tall cylinder or space with its contents sealed (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Recently that connotation has also been ascribed to e-Learning in online courses; the content and meaning is contained within the unique virtual space of the CMS silo, inside the university course host's site. To get students out of their CMS silos, and into dialogue and class participation, there is often a need for students to have more stimulation than simply posting on course module's discussion links and web boards. But any activities, aside from the required student participation, must be planned by the teacher and it usually must be posted in a discussion link or an adjacent blog since the actual course cannot be altered. So, often online teachers may not grasp the need for consideration of a conceptually different role of the instructor to seek ways to enlist learners' active participation in online course environments. With the influx of numerous novice and fearful online learners, the need to reach and help them become involved and collaborative becomes even more imperative (Joosten, Cusatis, 2019).

Student self-regulation is important, but beyond this is the need for opportunities to participate with the instructor in dialogue and social communication. Semiotic interactivities, such as the use of discourse narratives, can encourage those hesitant or late adapters to venture out of their silos and into the e-learning community.

Narrative Enhancements

A narrative is defined by Labov (1972) as a series of temporarily sequenced and linked clauses.

> Oral narratives can function (a) to open—or prime—discussion, inviting subsequent responses and narratives; (b) to sustain discussion by responding to a topic introduced by another and to continue the talk; (c) to sympathetically ratify or affirm the words and, indeed, the speaking rights, or another; and (d) to amplify or extend the stories of others . . . in conversation . . . related to narrative in interaction . . . Through these processes, storytellers and interlocutors collaboratively make sense of their lives and the lives of others in dialogue (Juzwik et al, 2008, 1117).

The following study (Bou Franch, 2012) addressed storytelling, another form of narrative, and in this case, digital storytelling. The Bou Franch study analyzed 16 digital stories from a multidisciplinary framework drawn from studies on digital storytelling and multimodal discourse analysis. Results showed that students as digital story tellers utilized several varied multimodal discursive strategies in educational settings. Digital storytelling, such as multi-media digital narratives, shared features with traditional forms of oral/written storytelling. The researcher explored multimodal discursive means to meet the needs to better display and help students integrate knowledge, also to be creative, i.e., with multimodal discursive strategies of factuality and subjectivity. The framework adopted a multidisciplinary approach, drawing on research across the areas of digital storytelling, computer-mediated communication, media studies, and multimodal discourse analysis. The study showed that storytellers made their stories personal while creating multimodal discourse that presented their narratives and cultural symbols. Having the ability to explore and take on new identities

allowed storytellers to tell their stories from different perspectives and helped the instructor to enlist students with dialog.

In the next study, Ahn, et al (2019) researched human-centered design (HCD) and the use of design narratives. The researchers' experience developing online course dashboards led them to consider a broader array of factors than the technologies or personal interfaces to improve their students online course designs. They felt there were important factors that needed to be included, such as, considerations of diverse types of users and broader sociocultural settings. They presented a design narrative intended to provide details about stakeholders, events, and details with key vignettes inviting interaction with students. Through well-designed digital interfaces and user engagement interactivities, such as narratives, the hope was to also reduce undesired cognitive load and draw upon prior knowledge and cultural experiences. Their perspectives aligned with data and their understanding of visual encoding, and they included interaction designs and participatory approaches that led to the assembly of their toolkit of semiotic contextual designs and interfaces. The findings of this study provided some insights into how both designers and students could utilize narrative features that enlist and involve learners to ease their anxieties and help mediate new learning with prior knowledge. They concluded that including design narratives helped in the design process.

One teacher's (Tochon 1992) exploration of narratives pursued the philosophical and semiotic implications of educational acts of meaning-making that were mediated through narrative inquiry. He posed that experience comes from the story humans make of it. He suggested narratives of experience indicate the way in which pupils and teachers share experiences and support communities of thought. He submitted that humans seem not to borrow their models from life, but from the stories they collectively construct from events transformed into language. Humans' identity come from and through discourse. "It is then involved in a dialogic frame where the story is progressively deepened and linked through multiple indexations" (Tochon, 1992, p. 6).

Human memory relies on narrative forms to memorize events, particularly those that are unorganized and vague. If narrative forms can be used to create stories, then lost memories can be retrieved in a disordered state to establish a causal relationship between events (Bal, 2009). Graphic design typically involves selecting images and aligning them in graphic materials to convey a certain concept; it features both text and images that generate a complete meaning. New meanings are generated when various signs are juxtaposed or manipulated because each individual sign has its own meaning in context. Accordingly, the quality of graphic design work is not determined by the audience's comprehension, but rather by whether the signs used by its designer has created a space of imagination in by each learner's personal experience. Bal (2009) posed that creativity in visual arts relies on common life experiences to communicate messages and resonates (or not) with the public and their visual values. The results of the experimental program in his study revealed that applying narrative theory to graphic design courses not only assisted the participants in developing more creative topics and visual concepts, but also in increasing their visual aesthetics. "We attend to the felt experiences of coping with and telling the "ongoing stories" of the everyday" (Massey and Bartley, 2005), p. 126.

Culture

Culture is conveyed through human's teachings and traditions using each society's communication tools, which in the 21st century is technological, as well as the use of older

media of text and narratives (McLuhan, 1968, 1976). Research studies, over the years, have occasionally recommended, more attention be paid to designing instructional courses to support cultural approaches to learning (Carey, 2008; Crawford, Gannon-Cook, 2008; Eetu, 2011; Gannon-Cook, 2016, 2011; Gannon-Cook & Ley, 2020). It is incumbent upon instructional designers and instructors to begin to look at opportunities to include primal semiotic tools, such as dialogic narratives, which could resonate with students who may not, otherwise, feel they have lifelines or connections to their online courses.

Cognitive load

Cognitive load issues also affect online learners because, according to cognitive load theory (Sweller, 1994), more than seven to eight mental processes can thrust learners' short-term memory into cognitive overload, cause stress, and impede learning. Semiotic tools, such as narrative texts, could be helpful to students who need that kind of cultural connector to mediate with new course content.

Studies (Hyder, 2015; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019), also pointed out that attrition rates in online courses were higher for at-risk, particularly African American males and Hispanic students (Lederman, 2013, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). While there are some studies that support the positive effects and influence of semiotics on indigenous students (Gannon Cook, 2016; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019; Reed, 2012), there are fewer studies that look at both retention and attrition in special needs, indigenous, and students of color (Betts, 2008; Gannon-Cook, Sutton, 2013; Reed, 2012; Stockall, 2013; Wang, et al, 2003; Yukseltruk, & Inan, 2006). The study pointed out that, while interventions could be facilitative for improving student involvement and retention, interventions also require investments in course redesigns, faculty professional development, learner and teacher support, and systematic assessments.

Methodology

The qualitative methodology of action research was analyzed using a semiotic approach to elicit and analyze students' relationship to their online learning experience. The study utilized eight courses from Fall 2017 through June 2019. The online learning environment of all these courses, both the university-designed and instructor-designed courses, included narrative semiotic enhancements added to the online discussion conferences, designed to create continuous and multiple narrative opportunities for learners to reflect upon their learning experience.

In this study, the research question posed was: Can dialog narratives co-occur in online course discussions, and if so, can these dialogic narratives engage learners more actively in online courses?

I reviewed eight courses from Spring 2018 through Spring 2019; three courses were university pre-designed, text-based, online courses with prescribed course objectives, instructional activities, and learning outcome measures. These three core courses were required to graduate: Research Seminar, (taught twice, fall 2018, 14 students, and Spring 2019; 16 students), and Advanced Plan to Graduate (AP), Spring. 2019; 11 students). In addition, I collected data on the five online courses I designed that included embedded semiotic cues and enhanced narratives (Technology, Training, and Human Performance (TTHP), Fall 2018, 18 students, and Spring 2019, 14 students); and Creating Digital Art (CDA), Fall 2018, 10 students, and Spring 2019, 19 students). A fifth course, Sites, Games

and Training Tools (SGT), was taught once (Winter, 2019, 11 students).

With the three pre-designed courses, I was able to add questions and extend discussions to the existing course conferences to optimize dialog and open the discourse to authentic narratives and conversations. I also used the same approaches in the five online courses I designed. Each module strategically included open questions that launched the opportunity for conversations and open narratives. Juzwik (Juzwik et al, 2008) had pointed out that learner achievement gains occurred when dialog and open narratives were encouraged; I wanted to find out if using dialogic narratives resulted in similar findings in these online courses.

Demographic data

The eight courses were all undergraduate courses and the students in the courses were all adults over 21 years of age. Most had taken at least one or more college courses; and most had been working for several or more years. 113 students enrolled in the eight courses were analyzed for the study. Ethnicity was broken down into five categories: African American, White, Latin X, Asian, and Arabic (See Figure 1). There was one blind student who used assistive technologies and two ADA students in the courses, all of whom participated in and successfully completed the courses.

(59 Females) (54 Males)

Demographics			Af.Am.		W		Latin X		Asian		Arabic		Af.Am.		W		Latin X		Asian		Arabic
Research 2018-19	14	2	Af.Am	5	W							1	Af.Am.	5	W			1	Asian		
Research 2017-18	15	3	Af.Am	2	W	1	Latin X	1	Asian			1	Af.Am.	3	W	3	Latin X			1	Arabic
TTHP W2018	15	3	Af.Am.	1	W	4	Latin X						Af.Am.	4	W	1	Latin X			2	Arabic
TTHP W2019	19	4	Af.Am	2	W	2	Latin X	1	Asian	1		2	Af.Am.	3	W	2	Latin X			2	Arabic
Creating Digital Art 2018	19	3	Af.Am	5	W	3	Latin X			1		3	Af.Am.	1	W	1	Latin X			2	Arabic
Creating Digital Art 2019	10	2	Af.Am	1	W	2	Latin X					3	Af.Am.	2	W						
Advanced Project 2018	10	1	Af.Am	1	W	1	Latin X					1	Af.Am.	4	W	1	Latin X			1	Arabic
Gamification	11	3	Af.Am	3	W			1	Asian					3	W					1	Arabic
Total	**113**																				

Figure 1. Demographic Data

There was a mix of ethnicities of students in the courses, with 32 African American (28%), 45 White (39%), 21 LatinX (18.5%), 4 Asian (4%), 11 Arabic (10%). I also noticed there were 10 students who had enrolled in more than one of these courses (9%), which suggested the students had informally shared course recommendations. (The two Research courses, and the Advanced Plan course, were taught by at least three instructors each quarter, so students had choices of instructors for these courses).

I studied the eight courses to assess students' responses: the number of responses to each post (see Figure 2), and the quality of the posts (see Appendixes A and B). While average discussion responses in courses often average one to three responses per student (Brown, Green, 2009; Jones, 2016; Lorenzetti, 2010), these courses surpassed those numbers with more than three responses, averaging five or more in each discussion module. (Some universities require students to post a specific number of responses weekly in each course module (Smith Jaggars, Xu, 2013), limit posts solely to the module topics or (Portacio, 2016; Vidmar, 2004) or even set maximum word limits per module). The difficulty of each assignment was rigorous; while there were specific assignments and

discussions (at least two-three per module) in each course, students were encouraged to be imaginative and were free to respond as innovatively as they chose in their assignments.

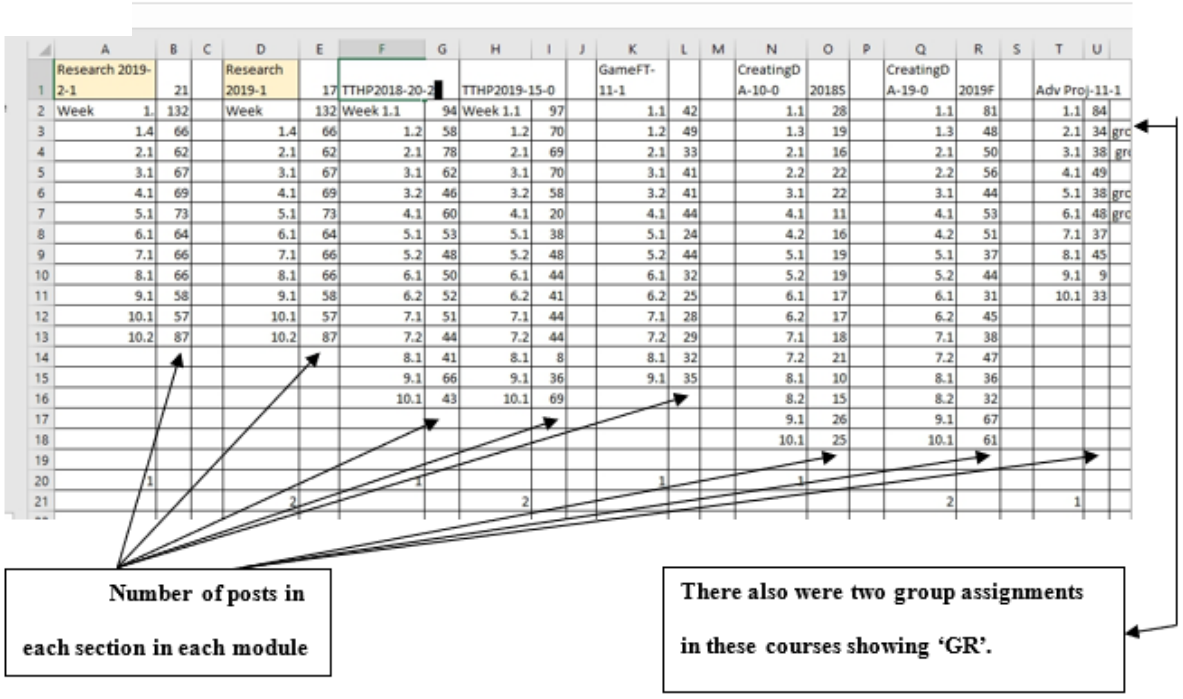

Figure 2 The Eight Courses and Student Response Numbers for Each Course and Module

Using a Bakhtinian analysis, I looked at how the learners responded, and whether the dialogic narratives fostered interactive and collaborative conversations. I wanted to see if the dialogs offered the learners both opportunities to discuss the new content material and to find ways to tie in, and mediate with, the learners' cultural experiences. Dialog and open narratives were encouraged in all the courses and, while there was little deviation in the pre-designed courses, I did not limit the number or size of student responses in those or the other courses. Several examples of expanded dialogic narratives were provided in a report by Liberman (2019) who provided an example of an instructor who developed a discussion board model that permitted students to respond as often as they wanted and who could even develop a few of their own discussion threads. In that study, students became more involved, often digressing slightly in their posts with personal experiences, but eventually going back to the module topics, often even expanding them. Their digressions created the online liminal spaces that helped them to feel more comfortable, let them use their cultural knowledge in their narrative threads, and gave them more confidence in their grasp of the coursework.

The two research and the one advanced plan course were particularly challenging for students because they must past those courses with at least a C- to graduate. In the earliest course module discussions, I opened narratives by sharing my experiences when I was a student, my fears of failure, and encouraged them to share their thoughts and concerns as they progressed. These narrative discussions seemed to help the students feel less apprehensive.

Hosting effective discussion boards and group projects require thoughtful planning (Martyn 2016). Group projects give students the opportunity to interact with classmates and reduce feelings of isolation. This concept, built upon the concept of community of learners, encourages students to develop course projects and work together while building an online community in and beyond the course. In addition, when peers are involved in, or leading

discussions, *"*as much as eighty percent of the students felt more motivated when the forum acknowledged their posting*"* (Woods & Bliss, 2016, p. 86). For these reasons, I built in at least one group project in each of the eight courses.

More faculty members are becoming aware of the educational values of online discussions and how these forums can elevate discussions to a superlative learning tool (Cheung et al, 2008; Deely, & Semetsky, 2017; Heinrich, Darling, 2020; Woods & Bliss, 2016). In these courses, the students often began the posts with short personal conversations with each other, the discussions then transformed into very apt comments on the module content matter. I closely monitored the conversational posts in these eight studies, quickly posting comments that could bring the students back to the course module content. While learners were not consciously aware of the semiotic enhancements, they seemed aware there were differences and a number of students even remarked that these courses seemed different. (See Appendix A for samples of student posts.)

Going back and reviewing the posts revealed that the students actively engaged in dialog on an ongoing basis, both with each other and with the teacher This finding aligned with the findings of the Juzwik study (Juzwik, et al, 2008), which indicated that narratives occurred more frequently with discussions that often included "events about the lives of family members, friends, and neighbors; events from television shows; events from other literary texts" (p.1132). Also, like the Juzwik findings, the majority of the course module narratives contained both personal and content-related postings which occurred often in clusters by topic or were initiated individually by students. The vast majority, over 70%, of the posts involved students sharing their personal experiences.

The findings supported prior research, that semiotically enhanced courses with dialogic narratives encouraged consistent interactivity, allowed for students to connect with both the instructor and each other, and corresponded with high completion rates in all eight courses.

A look at course dropout rates

All eight courses were set up in the DTL software which deletes students' names registered for courses that dropped before the first class. The number of student drops counted in these eight courses were students who dropped the courses at, after the first class, or at some point during the course. There were six student drops from the eight courses of 113 students, or a 5% attrition (See Figure 3). Both sections of the Creating Digital Art course had attritions (CDA 2018-three drops, one at the first class, two at the fourth class; CDA2019-one drop at the first class); Technology and Human Performance (THP Fall 2018 had one drop at the first class); and Sites Games & Training showed one student drop who never attended the class.

Student Dropouts from Online Courses	Spring 2018-Spring 2019		Number of Students in Class	% of Attrition
Research Seminar Fall 2018	0	Research 2018-19	14	0
Research Seminar Winter 2019	0	Research 2017-18	15	0
Creating Digital Art Spring 2018	3	TTHP W2018	15	20%
Creating Digital Art Spring 2019	1	TTHP W2019	19	0.05%
Technology Training & HP Winter 2018	0	Creating Digital Art 2018	19	0
Technology Training & HP Fall 2018	1	Creating Digital Art 2019	10	0.10%
Sites Games & Training Tools	1	Advanced Project 2018	10	10%
Advanced Project	0	Gamification	11	0
Total Attritions	6	**Total Students 113 = 5% attrition**	113	5%

Figure 3. Course Attritions

Limitations to the study

There were several limitations to study, the first being a small sample size, 113 students in the eight classes. In addition, the types of courses were varied. Some terms also varied: the terms teacher and instructor were used interchangeably, as well as student and learner throughout the study.

All identifying student names have been removed from the study and appendices, replaced with pseudonyms to assure student anonymity. In addition, the university's name was removed, as well as any description (public, private, location), and original course names were also replaced to assure maximum anonymity and for the security of the data provided. The study received permission from the university's I.R.B. (Institutional Research Board). There are no potential sources of conflict of interest nor any interest or relationship, financial or otherwise, that might affect or be perceived as an influence on the author's objectivity.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest there is a social aspect to learning that should be considered, particularly with respect to interfacing with students' prior knowledge. Semiotic tools, such as dialogic narratives, present students with coherent thematic experiences that can effectively mediate with their prior cultural and learning experiences and encourage learners' participation in online courses. Students' interactions with the narratives and presentations in the course moved from monological to dialogical expressions. Implementation of dialogic narratives included in course discussions in this study promoted deeper engagement of the online learners in the eight online courses included in the study.

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Appendix A
Excerpts from Course Posts[1]

(1) Research Seminar Fall 2018

Hi everyone!(K) I am in my second year in the program and am majoring in television and media production. I am really interested in storytelling and what the language used in a specific story or article can tell the reader about the author or the era it was written in. I don't have much research experience aside from what's been required in my education so far so I am insecure about my ability to do it and I am looking forward to taking this course so that I can improve on that. I don't mind being wrong on a subject or in a conversation but I don't like to be nervous about something that I can improve on so I think that this course is going to be perfect to learn from. One of my downfalls in completing any research at all has been that I don't ask the right questions. I notice that I tend to overthink what I'm trying to research and end up off topic and then spiral into this web of doubt over what I'm trying to accomplish in the first place. First things first, I think I probably need to relax but after that, I could improve on the questions that I ask. Can't wait to hear from all of you!

--Jan 6, 2018 7:02 PM Hi K, I enjoyed reading on your background here, and think that you are actually very well situated to improving on the areas you mention given how well you articulate your awareness of wanting to work on specific areas of focus and how to frame questions involved in work that you do. I'll be looking forward to your posts and seeing how you progress during the course. Good luck! D

--K Jan 5, 2018 1:41 PM Ha! Absolutely. And please, feel free to correct me as well! It sounds like we'll all learn a lot from one another and this course. I'm looking forward to it!

--Jan 5, 2018 1:42 PM K Overthinking is the worst but it's so easy to do. I also have a habit to procrastinate... it doesn't help with the struggle of self-doubt.

--Jan 5, 2018 1:43 PM It sounds like we all have similar habits, I'm glad to know I'm not the only one! :)

--Jan 5, 2018 1:43 PM Hi Dr. I'm really relieved to know that so many people do the same things I do, it gives me some hope :)

--Jan 2, 2018 8:38 PM Hello K, I can understand the challenge of over thinking a topic to the point that it takes away from what you were supposed to do to begin with; paralysis by analysis. The other challenge I run into is simply procrastinating and then rushed to complete a presentation. Therefore, I am striving to stay on point from beginning to end during this course and learn as much as possible. M

--Jan 2, 2018, 1:40 PM. R Hello K, Nice to meet you and welcome to the course. I will try to watch my spelling and grammar knowing that your focus area is editing, but if I do make mistakes feel free to call me on them**!**

Instructor: I agree with you in the fact that storytelling is a wonderful subject and one can learn a lot from it and the author. In regard to research skills, it is a great tool to learn how to utilize, especially in this technology age where we have access to so much information. We all get nervous about research--it is so hard because you think you've researched all the seminal data about a subject, then you find that something just got put on the web or available through a library that may have been hidden in an obscure library somewhere and voila! You didn't even know a thing about it. Frustrating! But it happens all the time because more and more is coming online that may not have been before, even books and journals 100 years old! What is important is to follow the steps prescribed for conducting accurate research--and this is in anything, not just academic research,

--Jan 3, 2018, 9:33 AM Hi K. As I was reading your post, it was like you were talking about me. I tend to overthink everything as well. It can be challenging because it does throw you off topic, hopefully over time it will come naturally. I like storytelling does give you an insight of what the author wanting to say or portray.

--Jan 3, 2018 9:53 AM On a personal note, just wanted to say how challenging this module has been. I read the readings several times and still find myself looking for the best course of action. I know we will have to revise our work several times and that it is part of the course but as I stated before this will be an interesting course. Also and on a lighter note, the research that some of you will be working on seems very interesting and am looking forward to reading it once we go through the refining and reviewing process.

(11 responses to 1 post by student K.)

--Jan 14, 2018, 10:14 PM K, I find this an interesting topic, knowing how my life has changed with the use of the internet, social media, and computers in general. I am of the age where word processors were a step above

[1] For a complete copy of Appendix A and Appendix B, please contact the author.

the electric typewriter I received when I started my freshman year of college. And we thought a word processor was amazing! I also think about how my kids basically never lived without the internet and social media and wonder what technology advances they will encounter in their lifetime. I wish you all the best with your research and completing the final assignment

-- Feb 10, 2018 9:14 PM

When it came to writing the review, were you satisfied with how well you had collected your annotated source entries? I was satisfied with my literature review, Sort of. When collecting sources and writing my annotated sources, I wasn't 100% sure what direction my paper was going to be headed. They helped me know which articles had what information in them to refer back to and which articles I needed to cite.

--Feb 14, 2018, 11:40 PM Instructor. Technology absolutely has changed so much of everything around us in so many ways. Understanding how human interaction is evolving and being shaped around internet technology may provide meaningful insight into dealing with change. There are numerous benefits beyond description, but a potential dark side too. While machines may not totally replace humans in the foreseeable future, there are growing reports of the mind becoming more distracted by multi-tasking and emotions becoming more detached. Nicholas Carr[2] wrote a book about it years ago, The Shallows, that has been followed by many others. People like Jaron Lanier[3], the person attributed with being the father of virtual reality have written books citing their growing concerns (I think his latest title was You Are Not a Gadget) and of course Elon Musk's[4] voicing of his concerns, etc.

Module 10-Final Submissions and Comments. (Posts began with students' responses)
--Mar 6, 2018, 10:08 AM Hello, Prior to the course, my research skills were minimal to moderate, post the course I feel confident in my new learned skills and know that I can research just about any subject, as well as select the appropriate method of research. Knowing the difference between quantitative and qualitative methods has made a world of difference; allowing me to, not just add this knowledge and skills to my own, but also knowing when and how to use them in the proper research environment. Within the many challenges of the course, one would have to be successfully completing the CITI program certification, as it was time-consuming, but the knowledge attained was well worth the investment. Although the entire course was challenging it has thickened my overall knowledge and skills. I know I will utilize the skills learned in my professional, personal, and academic life. Overall, the research seminar course was among the most challenging but also rewarding course that I have taken so far, and although am glad to have successfully completed**.** I also understand that this is, in great part, due to the several learning tools at my disposal, including the discussion board which aided me and my peers in further understanding the subject matter.

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2 Carr, N. 2010. The shallows: How the Internet is changing the way we think, read and remember. NY: W.W. Norton. ISBN-10: 1848872275

3 Lanier, J. 2010. *You are not a gadget: A Manifesto*. NY: Simon and Shuster. ISBN-10: 0141049111

4 Dowd, M. (April 17, 2017). Elon Musk's billion-dollar crusade to stop the A.I. apocalypse. Vanity Fair. https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2017/03/elon-musk-billion-dollar-crusade-to-stop-ai-space-x