Politeness and Face in Digitally Reconfigured E-learning Spaces

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Abstract: This paper has two starting points. The first is a theorization about the way in which “rhetorical space” is reshaped in asynchronous, online, learning environments. In particular, an asynchronous bulletin-board (ABB) discussion offers both opportunities and constraints for teaching and learning. The learning that occurs will be affected by the affordances implicit in the design of the conversational space itself and the communicative practices engaged in by both teachers and students. The second starting point is a small case study, utilizing action research and discourse analytical strategies, whose research participants were the author and students involved in “delivering” and “receiving” an online education course at post-graduate level using asynchronous discussion. The course, taught in English, had a mix of Chinese students (for whom English was an additional language) and native English speakers. The paper will report on students’ perceptions of what worked for them and what didn’t in respect of this e-learning environment. It will also use concepts such as politeness, face and positioning to analyse aspects of the participants’ communicative practices and will draw conclusions from these in respect of how successful learning can occur in e-learning environments with multicultural and multilingual students. It will make connections between the findings of this case study and other research on asynchronous, web-based learning and will make some suggestions about what is needed in respect of the future research agenda.