ESTABLISHING MEANINGFUL RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN A SMALL DISCOURSE COMMUNITY TO ENHANCE STUDENTS' ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS

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Rezumat: *Abilitatea de a crea texte coerente este o componentă esențială în formarea academică a studentului. Procesul de scriere în scopuri academice este unul anevoios, care este considerat de către studenți ca fiind unul nesemnificativ. Studenții deseori nu sunt pregătiți să producă texte coerente în scopuri academice. Mai mult, ei nu realizează importanța scrisului academic în formarea lor profesională. Articolul de față examinează factorii ce ar contribui la crearea unei comunități discursive, care, la rândul ei, ar spori calitatea scrisului academic la studenți.*
Cuvinte-cheie: *comunitate discursivă, interacțiune academică, scris academic*.

The notion of discourse community has been defined by Swales (1990) who believes that there are six criteria to be met in order to be able to state what a discourse community is. Thus a discourse community:

1. has common goals,
2. has its own mechanisms of interaction,

3. is participatory and provides information and gives feedback,
4. has one or more genres to communicate its aims,
5. operates with a specific lexis,
6. has expert members.

In 2016 this definition was revised and other two criteria were added to the list (Swales, 2016). Therefore, a discourse community has to develop a sense of the so-called 'silential relations' (Becker, 1995). Quite often, there are things which remain 'unsaid' and, yet, the text is coherent and appropriately decoded. There is a tacit agreement within a discourse community as to what is to be included and what is to be implied in a research paper.

The eighth criterion introduces the notion of horizons of expectations which are to be developed in the process of academic interaction. This is possible only if the sender of the message is aware of the other's presence while encoding it. On the other hand, the receiver is expected to have developed the sender's awareness in the process of decoding the message. In this way communication is possible in an academic context, where very often the channel of communication is the written text (i.e. research papers, articles etc.)

While conducting my PhD research (Condrat, 2017) I noticed that students need to feel the sense of affiliation to a discourse community in order to succeed in producing coherent texts. Thus, the concept of discourse community is central to academic writing as it helps to make writing more purposeful. Feeling affiliated to a particular discourse community empowers the students to contribute their own knowledge to it.

In the conducted research, blogging was used as a platform which enabled the students to communicate and gradually gain their authorial voice. Thus, they tried to build their own small discourse community where they communicated their thoughts and ideas. The interaction that took place between them helped them gain confidence as writers for academic purposes, on the one hand, and make the process of writing more purposeful, on the other.

It is assumed that in order to make every educational process a success, all the participants involved in it should build meaningful relationships (Caon, 2006: 25). In Figure 1, it is evident that what makes a meaningful relationship is:
1. the awareness of the need why one is doing it (i.e. writing a text),
2. the feeling of pleasure in doing the action (i.e. writing);
3. the development of the sense of duty (the participant should realize the paramount importance of the action for his/her academic development).

Figure 1: *Caon's motivational model*

pleasure   need

Meaningful relationship

sense of duty
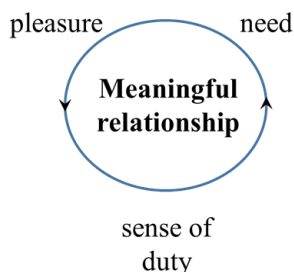
While working with the students it became evident that one more factor substantially contributes to the creation of meaningful relationships. The participants should clearly understand the purpose of the interaction. Thus as long as the students do not see any purpose in writing for academic purposes, no meaningful relationships can be built. Therefore, it is essential to add this component to the model above, which is meant to boost students' motivation. Figure 2 displays the completed model.

**Figure 2:** *Motivational model in the education process*
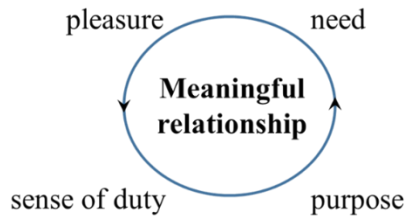
During the conducted experiment in 2014-2015, which aimed to determine whether or not blogging could contribute to the students' enhancement of academic writing skills, it was observed that while practicing blogging students managed to form their small discourse community and thus make their interaction more purposeful. They built meaningful relationships not only with the teacher but also among themselves. It appears that their writing skills improved due to the interaction happening above all between the teacher and the students. However, it is believed that their confidence as academic writers increased due to the meaningful relationships they built within their small discourse community.

Although the students were encouraged to regularly post comments on each other's posts, it was noticed that they preferred to interact face-to-face. They would write feedback to a peer's writing, but would continue to verbally discuss their results whenever they met at the university. Although the students had a highly developed sense of duty and they understood why they needed to develop their academic skills, it was seen at first that they found little pleasure in writing for academic purposes, moreover, the purpose was not totally clear to them. However, at the end of the experiment it was possible to conclude that the students found the process of academic writing more pleasurable and purposeful. Consequently, their motivation to write for academic purposes has increased too. They admitted to have finally understood what the purpose of writing for academic purposes is, becoming more empowered and confident academic writers. They also acknowledged the tremendous role their peers played in the process of their writing. The written communication stopped being viewed as a one-direction process of communication. They developed a better reader awareness and were trying to meet the horizons of expectations of their readers.

It was also interesting to note that within this small discourse community, the participants formed a sub-community. The interaction pattern differed every time the students interacted. One interaction model is shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: *Interactional model within the discourse community 1*
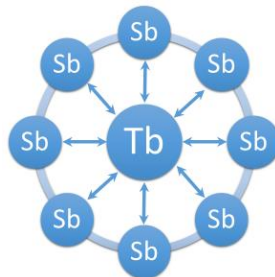
As seen, in this model the students centred their communicative interaction on the teacher. The teacher was believed to be the expert member who could provide valuable feedback. It can be stated that during written interaction the students waited namely for the teacher's feedback and would reluctantly write their own as they trusted the teacher more than the other members of their discourse community. That could explain the relatively small number of student's comments as compared to those of the teacher.
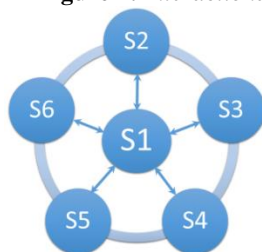
Figure 4 displays a second interaction model within this discourse community. This time the interaction was centred on one member of the group. Indeed, Student 1 was perceived as an authority within the discourse community, her expertise was most trusted. Students would often talk to her when they faced some challenges in their process of academic writing. She showed more enthusiasm than the other members and was always willing to help. The interaction they preferred to have was mostly face-to-face, every time they met. They would talk about academic writing and their drafts during breaks at the university or while walking home.

The last interaction pattern is shown in Figure 5, where it is possible to trace the nuanced interactional relationships within even smaller groups.

Figure 5: *Interactional model within the discourse community 3*

As seen, even within such a small discourse community there were three pairs having closer relationships. It is to be noted that even this pair grouping is centred on the pair of Student 1. Actually, Student 1 and Student 6 were believed to be the most experienced among the other members.

Figure 5 displays a possible way of establishing meaningful relationships in a small, local discourse community. This community is expected to fulfil the eight main criteria as described by Swales (2016). Consequently, it shall have:

1. common goals: to tell knowledge / transform knowledge;
2. intercommunication: face-to-face (during classes), online (writing academic assignments);
3. participatory mechanisms: giving feedback to the peers' posts;
4. genres: writing essays, reporting on an assigned topic, articles, analyses, research papers;
5. specific lexis: the use of academic, discipline-related vocabulary;
6. members of expertise: teachers, more experienced colleagues;
7. silential relations: the tacit acknowledgement of things unsaid but implied, which in most cases would make sense only to this particular context;
8. horizons of expectations: by building meaningful relationships within their small discourse community students were more likely to meet the expectations of their fellows.

It should be pointed out that such discourse communities should be fostered by the teacher. Moreover, the teacher should be prepared to be part of the discourse community as he/she will always be referred to as the member with a higher degree of discourse expertise. Similarly, he/she will be able to motivate students to become more confident and self-reliant.

Academic interaction is of extreme importance in the students' growth as academic writers. Although nowadays much emphasis is put on encouraging students to take responsibility for their

own learning, the teacher's presence is essential at least at the initial stage. It appears students need to get constant feedback from their teachers in order to gain more confidence and overcome writing apprehension. That is why the teacher needs to be actively involved in the students' discourse community, establishing meaningful relationship with all its members.

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