Imaginary Selves and Shifting Signifiers: What's Really Going On in an Online Chat Classroom?

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ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on what it is about chat rooms that can help or hinder successful learner interaction. Based on a textual analysis of an educational chat room activity it brings together two analytic approaches, critical discourse analysis and Freudian/Lacanian psychoanalysis. It argues that the approaches are complementary, as both look beneath the surface of the linguistic choices made by subjects, and that in combination they can help to reveal the interpersonal dynamics of an interaction. It gives an account of participants getting caught up in interpersonal misunderstandings and envious comparisons, distracting them from their educational purpose, and suggests that this may be linked to the lack of sensory (visual, auditory) information coupled with the time-based nature of chat rooms. It proposes some tactics that might help online educators to avoid these pitfalls.

Keywords

Chat rooms, online identity, online interaction, Lacanian psychoanalysis, discourse analysis

INTRODUCTION

In education there is evidence that asynchronous online communication ("discussion boards") is being adopted more readily and more widely than its synchronous counterpart ("chat rooms") (Cook 2005). Is this just because synchronous chat is less convenient, or is it in some way harder to use? Literature suggests that online chat has educational benefit (e.g. Grigsby 2001, Almeida d'Eça 2003) though concern is expressed about low participation, trivialising and excessive off-topic interaction (Kirkpatrick 2005). This paper attempts to provide greater insight into the peculiarities of online synchronous text communication and the kinds of interaction that it produces.

The paper outlines Lacan's triadic model of psychological experience: the Imaginary, the Symbolic and the Real, and applies this to discussions in the literature about the nature of online interaction. It then explores parallels between psychoanalysis and discourse analysis based on their shared focus on language. These ideas are then applied to a detailed analysis of a chat room transcript. Findings are then discussed, with support from some of the participants' own reflections. The applicability to chat rooms in general is debated, and some tactics for chat-room tutors are recommended.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Imaginary, the Symbolic and online chat

The Imaginary relates to the way in which our sense of self, ('ego') develops in infancy, and the repercussions of this throughout life. It is during what Lacan called the "mirror stage" that the infant first emerges from the undifferentiated state of babyhood and perceives an "image of its own unity and coherence" (Fink 1997: 89). Crucial to this idea, and to the analysis in this paper, is that the ego is constructed through an identification with an image reflected by the infant's significant other (or Other/mOther), or what Lacan calls the "specular other" (Lacan 1949). For Lacan this image is intimately connected to the desire of the Other; we seek to be what the Other appears to desire or lack, to be her counterpart and thus to dissolve our own otherness (Bowie 1991). The child seeks to know what he is in the desire of the Other, to solve "the enigma of the adult's desire"(Lacan 1964), so that when an image of himself is ratified by a gesture of approval from the Other it becomes invested with great importance (Fink 1997). If there are siblings involved, then the image will have a rivalrous aspect "what do you want me to be, that my brother is not?" The Imaginary, although phantasmic, is that which sustains the "mental permanence of the I" (Lacan 1949) and so may be highly durable and resistant to change. In Lacanian thought, the Imaginary has significant pejorative connotations, for the

subject stuck in the Imaginary is seen as lost in a rigid world of rivalry, narcissism, and ultimately delusion. For the subject to develop to maturity, the Imaginary must be overwritten by the Symbolic.

The Symbolic extends Freud's idea of the superego as an inner manifestation of parental authority to represent the often unconscious or implicit system of rules, laws and taboos that govern and structure cultural life, and to the individual's stance towards this. In the Imaginary the desire of the Other is perceived through sense perceptions of all kinds and through fantasy. When the ego image is threatened, it seeks to stabilise its own shifting reflection, but meanings drift around on winds of paranoia. In the Symbolic the subject finds what Lacan calls an anchoring point (Dor 1985) where meanings become stable, fixed by the Law. The first of these rule-based systems is language itself, and in the Symbolic it is through language that the desire of the Other is articulated. The Symbolic is the result of what Lacan calls "The Law of the Father" which is enacted through the metaphor of castration, where the omnipotence of the infant is surrendered in exchange for the opportunity to take his place in social life. Where in the Imaginary the ego seeks to maintain a phantasm of wholeness and permanence, "the Symbolic is inveterately intersubjective and social. It is a *res publica* that does not allow any one of its members to be himself, keep himself to himself or recreate in his own image the things that lie beyond him" (Bowie 1991: 93). Unlike the Imaginary, Symbolic relations are not concerned with issues of identity and comparison with others but with ideals and with our relation to the symbolic Law. We operate in the Symbolic when we are concerned with knowing and understanding the world as it is (Fink 1997). In this sense, the activity of learning and teaching is one that takes place in the Symbolic.

Lacan's model would be incomplete without a brief account of his third order, the Real, although it is not the focus of this paper. The Real for Lacan is simply "that which cannot be symbolized" and since it cannot be expressed in language remains mysterious and elusive. In a sense it corresponds to notions of chance or blind fate, representing a trauma to the subject in that it is experience not (yet) symbolized or made sense of. A tiny baby probably knows nothing but the Real of its own bodily needs and impulses. The Real is the sudden event that impinges upon and carves a gash into consciousness. It is the Real that upsets and maintains the dynamism of and between the Imaginary and the Symbolic (Bowie 1991).

How might Lacan's ideas contribute to our understanding of online text communication? As we know, the online medium lacks the visual and auditory information (body language, facial expressions, tone of voice etc) available in face to face communication. It consists almost exclusively of words, of language. Some authors (Joinson 2003, Kiesler 1984) claim that these characteristics inhibit the development of online relationships. In this view, known as the 'Relationship Lost' approach, it is difficult to gauge online how others are responding to you so it is difficult to trust and feel safe. The 'Relationship Liberation' approach takes a different view (Walther 1996), arguing that the medium allows participants to present themselves as anything they want, and this can rapidly lead to a state of apparent intimacy.

On the face of it a Lacanian view might seem to support the Relationship Liberation stance, in which lack of sensory information in online chat frees the participant from the mirror of the Imaginary, from the gaze of the Other, and enables him instead to use an image of his own making. Moreover, since online chat is a medium of language rather than of the sense organs, its interactions might be expected to remain firmly in the Symbolic and thus oriented toward the content of learning. However, the evidence presented later in this paper suggests that the Imaginary cannot be so easily banished, and that if the desire of the Other is not perceived through the senses then it must be constructed through phantasy.

Analytical approach

The author has a background in critical discourse analysis, and is inspired by the work of Fairclough, for whom discourse means not just identifying patterns in language use, but seeing discourse as the result of linguistic choices made by participants. These choices have social consequences (Fairclough 2003).

The Lacanian psychoanalytic approach is particularly compatible with discourse analysis because of its focus on language. Lacan notes that Freud's analyses of dreams and the unconscious symbolism used by his patients depend on jokes, puns and associations that are chiefly *verbal* (Freud 1905). Lacan takes Saussure's notion of a sign, made of 'signifier' (a word) and 'signified' (the thing it points to), and argues that there is no inherently stable relationship between signifier and signified. Signifiers only

have meaning with reference to other signifiers, and can be substituted for other signifiers (Dor 1985). Furthermore all signifiers are metaphors, in that they substitute and stand for that which is signified, so that as we enter language we become alienated, only able to know or refer to anything, including ourselves, indirectly through metaphor.

In Freud's account of the two main mechanisms of unconscious processes, meaning is either condensed (in metaphor) or displaced (in metonymy). These essentially linguistic phenomena underlie Lacan's claim that the unconscious is structured like a language. Dor (1985: 140-143) provides a good clinical example of how this can function with the case of a woman who developed a phobia of leather handbags. Analysis revealed that a metonymic substitution had taken place of *leather (crocodile skin)* for *crocodile*, which had earlier become a metaphor for unconscious sexual repression in response to a prohibition by her mother. Viewed in this way, Lacanian psychoanalysis is in itself a form of discourse analysis, focussing on signifiers used in patients' discourse and unearthing their connections to other unconscious signifiers which they have displaced (Fink 1997).

Where Lacan's view of language derives from structuralism, Fairclough's approach is based on systemic linguistics (Halliday and Matthiesen 2004), which focuses on the functional and contextual elements of language. A key idea from Halliday and Hasan (1989) is that of textual cohesion. This describes the ways in which components in a text can refer to one another in order to render the text intelligible. These include the use of pronouns (he, it, etc.) to refer to nouns, but also synonymy, hyponymy and many others. Despite their different backgrounds, Hasan's approach does not so much contradict Lacan's view but extends it – for what is a metaphor but a signifier that stands in the place of or refers to another?

Just as the psychoanalytic encounter can bring to light references (or cohesive ties in Hasan's terms) of which the patient is unconscious, the following will deconstruct the processes of substitution occurring in an online group interaction. We can see how the reaction of one participant to the words of another may not be a reaction to the words uttered but to the words they assume have been uttered. In observing this, we can see how participants have constructed themselves and each other in the Imaginary.

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Background to the Data

The chat session took place near the end of a Masters' module during which groups of students set up and ran an online course as tutors, over a three-week period. Students also enrolled and participated as learners on courses run by other groups. In the extracts presented here, Diana and Felicity were acting as tutors, Annette, Rose and Carla as learners (note that all names have been changed to protect anonymity). It should be observed that none of the participants had English as their first language, and that between them they represented three very different cultural and linguistic traditions. Prior to this session they had met each other face-to-face and interacted online on numerous occasions. The purpose of the session was to review their online course and carry out the final course activities. As part of a later MSc dissertation, some of the participants were interviewed about their experience of this chat session, and some extracts are used here where they help to illustrate or support the analysis. The analysis focuses on one issue that resurfaced many times throughout the one-hour session. This concerned the apparent lack of participation during the course of one "learner", Rose. Rose herself initiated many of the references to this, and interpreted much of what the others' said in the light of it.

Chat room transcript and Analysis

At the start of the chat session (at 18:11 hrs) Rose had not yet appeared, and there was some discussion to the effect that she had not visited the course for the previous 6 days and had not done the task to prepare for that evening's session. When Rose did join the chat, she apologized for being late and this was accepted. Then the "tutors" asked their "learners" for their feedback on their course (extract 1).

Extract 1

utterance 157:	18:38	**Annette:**	From my view I liked that you have lots of activities
158:	18:38	**Annette:**	although I took time to do
159:	18:38	**Annette:**	but thinking about it as a course that's how it should be
160:	18:38	**Rose:**	Ya, I think so

161:	18:38	**Felicity:**	you were a very good student.....Annette
162:	18:39	**Rose:**	sorry, Felicity
163:	18:39	**Diana:**	why are u sorry?
164:	18:39	**Felicity:**	☺
165:	18:39	**Felicity:**	Rose........
166:	18:39	**Diana:**	come on
167:	18:39	**Diana:**	you all did a good job
168:	18:40	**Felicity:**	yes.............
169:	18:40	**Diana:**	I wish my students in my country were like that

Annette's feedback is objective and 'on task'. Her "that's how it should be" (utterance 159), expresses a general principle and so lies within the Symbolic. But Felicity's "you were a very good student, Annette" (161) applies a signifier to the self-image of Annette (the Imaginary). Rose reacts - "sorry, Felicity" (162). The tutors struggle to make sense of this; "why are u sorry?" (163) and are lost for the words to address it. Eventually Diana understands what Rose meant; "you all did a good job"(167) contradicts the implicit statement that Rose heard and so reveals it to have been '′Annette was a good student, but Rose was not′'.

Here we see the self imagined into being by reference to its reflection in the specular other, in this case through unfavourable comparison with a rival (the sibling in Lacan's view). It is also an example of the shifting chain of signifiers – one statement is taken to stand for another. "You are not a good student" is substituted for "She is a good student". The participants are reacting to signifiers they cannot see.

We might also note that this exchange began with an exchange of "feedback" – an activity that could be described as people finding where they stand in each other's desire. Rose was not initially mentioned in this – but the effect of her "sorry" was to provoke some feedback, even if this wasn't quite the response she wanted. "Sorry" has the effect of saying "please recognize me too". Perhaps any mirror image is better than none at all. This was immediately followed by extract 2.

Extract 2

170:	18:40	**Rose:**	but this was a good chance for u of thinking how to deal with lazy students
171:	18:40	**Felicity:**	i am going to feel bad now...Rose
172:	18:40	**Felicity:**	☹
173:	18:40	**Felicity:**	didnt mean anything wrong for u
174:	18:41	**Diana:**	Rossssssssssssssssse
175:	18:41	**Rose:**	where can I get these funny smilies
176:	18:41	**Diana:**	Relaxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx
177:	18:41	**Rose:**	i'm fine

At the surface level of the text Rose's comment (170) seems to be addressed to the task at hand (reflecting on how to run an online course), and thus to the Symbolic. It does not explicitly refer to Rose but makes a general point. Yet Felicity's response shows that this is not the level at which the utterance is understood. In fact, Rose's "this" in "but this was a chance for u…" (170) can be taken to refer to Rose's earlier non-participation, but also to the unuttered "Rose is a bad student", by which she links herself through metonymy to "lazy students". So it is ambiguous whether the signifier "lazy students" stands for "students we have to work hard to motivate" (Symbolic) or simply "Rose" (Imaginary).

Felicity's "I didn't mean anything wrong for u…" (173) refers back to her earlier statement (161), implicitly "…when I said Annette was a good student". What is Felicity supposed to have said that she needs to deny? Rose seems to be saying that by "Annette is a good student" Felicity also meant to say "Rose is a lazy student". Felicity has taken Rose to mean "lazy students like me, according to you" and finds herself in the position of judgmental authority figure from which she tries to escape.

In Lacanian terms the way we might understand this is that Rose has been very successful in opening up a lack in the Other; she has left the tutors lost for words to respond. This gives her a space within which to position herself in relation to the Other's desire. When she says "but this was a good chance

for u…" (170) she seems to say "I was not a good student, but I had value for you in another way. I am an example of something bad that you can learn from. This is what I am to you". Thus she constructs an answer to the question "what does the Other want of me?" and solves the enigma of the Other's desire.

Also of note is the use of repeated letters in Diana's response to represent the slow, calming speech of a mother, soothing and cajoling Rose's upset child. As Diana herself said *"Using this I give more intensity to what I'm saying like when you talk and you change the tone of your voice. I try to talk more tenderly to her."* With this, as well as with the use of "emoticons" (164, 172) we see the participants' attempting to recreate the visual and auditory images that are missing online. For both tutors, words have failed them and there are no smiles, no sounds with which to negotiate this Imaginary hall of mirrors.

Extract 3

178:	18:41	**Annette:**	i think this is good issue to deal with in the assignment
179:	18:41	**Annette:**	how to motivate students?
180:	18:41	**Diana:**	yes you are right Annette
181:	18:42	**Rose:**	i AM motivated

Again (utterances 178 and 179) Annette operates in the Symbolic – focusing on principles from which one can learn rather than comparing herself with others, and orienting herself towards the symbolic Law (the assignment). Again Rose reinserts herself into the discourse about good/bad/lazy/motivated students and redirects it towards the Imaginary, by seeming to respond to a statement that is not present in the text. Her use of capitals in "i AM" (181) represents the written equivalent of emphasis used in speech used to contradict a previous statement, which is thus revealed to be "Rose is not motivated".

Although from this point the discussion goes onto other, much more "on task" topics, as the session draws to a close nearly 30 minutes later Rose is still struggling with the image of herself as "bad student", and the tutors are still being drawn into it (extract 4).

Extract 4

366:	19:11	**Carla:**	yeah thank u for the interesting learning materials
367:	19:11	**Diana:**	You were great students!
368:	19:12	**Rose:**	Me not!
369:	19:12	**Felicity:**	thank you for your time
370:	19:12	**Diana:**	Rose
371:	19:12	**Felicity:**	come on Rose
372:	19:12	**Diana:**	come on

In extract 5, (utterances 374 and 375) Rose states quite explicitly her envy of and rivalry with Annette. The image of envy evoked by Lacan (1977: 116) seem pertinent here – "the little child seeing his brother at his mother's breast, looking at him *amare conspectu,* with a bitter look", a look he equates with the evil eye, the "voracious" eye. It is not that she desires the object that the other has; what is envied is the satisfaction that the other seems to derive from it. Annette is finally drawn into the Imaginary (377), perhaps feeling a need to defend herself from the look of envy, which might be all the more powerful for existing only in the imagination. Yet finally here the issue has broken through into language. Diana's response (380, 381) is what a mother might say to an envious child – and finally Rose is spoken to directly - which is perhaps only possible now that the problem has at last been stated explicitly.

Extract 5

374:	19:12	**Rose:**	i feel bad, bc Annette did well
375:	19:13	**Rose:**	but i did not
376:	19:13	**Felicity:**	Annette Rose and Carla give me your msn names to put you on my contacts
377:	19:13	**Annette:**	do not say that Rose
378:	19:13	**Diana:**	she was talking directly to Annette
379:	19:13	**Carla:**	see u, Annette
380:	19:13	**Diana:**	tht doesn't mean

381:   19:13   **Diana:**   you were not good

DISCUSSION

What does this analysis tell us about the nature of chat rooms?

Analysis of this chat session has revealed several examples of participants operating and getting stuck in the Imaginary: signifiers are unanchored, implicit, unverbalised; people react to what they perceive has been said; they compare themselves with others, and they fulfil or refuse the imagined demands of the Other. The tutors too are drawn into addressing the Imaginary rather than asserting the Symbolic.

But how far can we claim that this occurred because they were working in a chat room? It is probably almost impossible to establish empirically that particular types of interactions are more likely to take place within a particular medium. Furthermore it should be noted that, since the tutors were actually students (peers) *acting as* tutors, there was clearly room for ambivalence about roles and authority within the session. This may have contributed to the confusion about identities and the reluctance of participants to assert the authority of the Symbolic. But if, these caveats notwithstanding, this case study does tell us something generalisable about chat room interactions, how do we account for it?

1) Online, the lack of visual, auditory and other sensory information makes it easier to talk about difficulties of the Imaginary but also makes them more likely to occur.

It might seem paradoxical that in a medium dominated by language, belonging to the Symbolic, the participants in this session should find themselves repeatedly sliding back into the shifting, phantasmic meanings of the Imaginary. The following comments from both Diana and Rose might help to explain this in part, by suggesting that in a face-to-face setting Rose's repeated forays into the imaginary would have been inhibited by the gaze of the other:

Diana: *"..if she saw our facial expressions, she would feel embarrassed to say that 'I'm sorry I was such a bad student' to show that she was really uncomfortable with Felicity's comment. Maybe she would just have a face of ...a certain expression in her face but she would not verbally express herself like that."*

Diana's interpretation is supported by Rose herself: *"When chatting online I felt freer to express myself and say some things I wouldn't say otherwise because of the fact that there was no physical presence...I mean sometimes it's harder to talk face to face. Because, when chatting, the other person doesn't see me I feel somehow protected."*

Yet perhaps as well as a lack of inhibition about expressing envious, rivalrous and narcissistic thoughts there is also a greater need to do so. Online, one tries to use words to carry out a function which belongs properly to the image, but because in the Imaginary their meanings are elusive and relative, this doesn't work. We should recall that for Lacan our ego image, our sense of ourself, can only exist with reference to the desire of the Other (Dor 1985), and that our perception of this is derived from an image - the Other's face or tone of voice for example. Without this, says Lacan, we are left in a state of intolerable anxiety, or what he calls angoisse, so that we would rather construct a phantasy of how we stand in relation to the Other than leave it as an unknown (Fink 1997). This is likely to be unconscious and derived from early (and probably forgotten) experiences. In an environment such as a chat room, where there is no image our phantasy will put great effort into (re)creating one. If this should be an empathic, all-understanding Other, or what Freud calls the "lost object", as in the idealized online Other proposed by Walther (1996), then an atmosphere of intimacy may indeed be engendered as Walther suggests. But as we have seen, in the specular, polarized nature of the Imaginary, our phantasy may equally construct an Other that is punitive and shaming. The element of phantasy may be more salient in online chat than with asynchronous online interaction (e.g discussion boards) because what happens is spontaneous and stimulated by the real-time presence of Imaginary others, with no time to reflect, only to react.

2) The meanings of signifiers online are more elusive, harder to anchor, particularly signifiers that relate to the participants themselves. There seem to be two reasons for this:

    a)   Online, particularly in a chat room, it is more difficult to follow the cohesive devices (Halliday and Hasan 1989) that show us how words refer to each other and therefore to be certain of what they mean in that context. This may be due partly to the fact that chat is actually not quite synchronous – whereas face-to-face only one speaker can normally have the floor at any one time, in chat several participants may be composing messages simultaneously and when these appear it can be

hard to know what they refer to. It is this that lies behind the common impression in a chat room that there are several conversations going on at the same time - and accounts for the incongruent utterances particularly in extracts 4 and 5 above (e.g 369, 376, 378). Furthermore, since participants cannot see each other, it is not always clear who they are addressing or whose part of the foregoing text they are referring to.

Conversely, chat is synchronous in that participants' fluency is limited by their typing speed. Fewer words can appear within a given amount of time, resulting in a form of truncated language. There is no time to explain references and no room for the normal linguistic redundancy that helps to pin down meanings. Things can only be said one time and in one way – there are gaps in the network of signifiers.

   b) If we believe that, as discussed above, in online interaction the Imaginary is less satisfied, more restless, then this in turn can be expected to undermine the stability of meanings.

Diana*: if it had happened face to face I don't think she would have misunderstood it so much, I don't know… Felicity was just commenting that 'Annette, you are a good student', she wasn't just saying you are the only good student. I don't know why Rose misunderstood that so. Maybe, sometimes, if you lack the facial expression, people may sort of misunderstand what you are trying to say.*

One way to interpret Diana's observation would be that the facial expression tells us where we stand with the Other and that without this we may supply our own, possibly inaccurate meaning. In the Lacanian Symbolic the desire of the Other is explicitly articulated in language (as the "no" of the father), and meanings are anchored by their location within shared cultural assumptions and understandings. But what happens, says Lacan, is that the Imaginary cuts across (or "chops up") this message, rendering it implicit, unconscious (Dor 1998). In this paper we have seen how, online, these distortions may be exacerbated by the absence of the visual and auditory image.

Application to learning and teaching

The interpersonal dynamics of online learners have been discussed by other authors using terms such as "social", "identity" or "online learning community" (e.g. Rovai 2002, McConnell 2002). Salmon (1999) stresses a need to establish online social relationships before learners can work effectively on what Henri (1992) classes as "cognitive" or "metacognitive" activities. Kirkpatrick's (2005) misgivings about the pedagogical potential of online chat are based in part on the amount of time and effort this involves.

The psychoanalytic perspective outlined in this paper offers insight into what it is that has to be worked through, and another way of understanding phrases like "establishing online identity", while alerting us to the compulsive and phantasmic aspects. However, it does not intend to imply that the Imaginary needs to be resolved before participants can work in the Symbolic. One cannot simply map social: Imaginary, cognitive: Symbolic, for the Lacanian subject encounters the Other within both the Imaginary and Symbolic, just in different ways. While in the former the subject seeks (in vain) for an image of himself that is enduring and self-contained, in the latter he discovers himself in relation to the world – always partial and mutable, yet guaranteed by the Law.

What is proposed here is that the chat-room tutor should work to develop and maintain relations within the Symbolic rather than the Imaginary. This is actually comparable to Lacanian psychoanalytic technique in which the analyst speaks from the Symbolic and avoids setting up positions for himself and the patient in the Imaginary. He does not communicate to the patient what he wants him to be, only his desire for the work, what Lacan calls "the analyst as cause" (of the patient's desire to work) (Fink 1997). The extract below from Kirkpatrick's (2005) paper (reproduced with the author's permission) gives an example of a teacher intuitively working in this way. Kirkpatrick's students were supposed to be discussing issues of reality with reference to the film The Matrix, but were actually gossiping about one of their peers who was participating on the Blind Date TV programme.

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S:      …..she did get picked and she's gone to the Yorkshire dales
GK:     Do you think you could defer discussion of your friend's dating activities for a few
(tutor)  minutes, please?
P:      When is she going?
GK:     groans
Q:      She was on TV, though.
GK:     yawns
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R:       It's dead exciting
GK:      falls asleep
P:       Aw, sorry Graeme!
Q:       You have our attention
S:       The Matrix then. that card thing was cheating. . .
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The tutor communicates his desire for his students to work but in an enigmatic and humorous way; there is an expectation but it is impersonal, neutral. He avoids setting up positions in the Imaginary, either for himself as authoritarian, judgmental, or for the students as naughty, bad etc, and yet retains his position as authority, as "one supposed to know"(Fink 1997). He avoids making statements about the participants themselves. He makes no evaluative comment about what the students are discussing.

As we saw earlier, feedback (from tutor to student or vice versa) runs the risk of being interpreted from within the Imaginary. Some ways of reducing this risk might be to: focus feedback on the work rather than the person, make generalised statements about the subject or the student's text and avoid making statements about the student themselves – to avoid applying a signifier to the student. More generally, we can be aware of the Imaginary and its dynamics, recognize it when it appears, understand its distorting influence on meanings, and be ready to interpret and untangle these when they occur.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has described how participants in a chat session were caught in an Imaginary conflict that remained unresolved for the duration of the session. The discussion has suggested that this might have been because the lack of sensory information left participants with only their phantasy to draw upon, which in turn led to more verbal misunderstandings, exacerbated by the typically disjointed structure of chat room interaction. The challenge for teachers is to find ways of keeping chat room interaction in the Symbolic, where the real work is done, and minimise distractions from the Imaginary. As educators we may be accustomed to keeping the discussion 'on task'. The ideas and analysis presented here may help to understand the influences that drag a session 'off task'.

While Lacan may be read as highly interpretive and almost poetic in his stance towards knowledge the reader will judge for themselves the plausibility of the analysis and the insight that his ideas offer. In the author's view they help to get at the core of what is happening, and are distinct in focussing on the individuals within the learning community rather than the community as a whole – while the linguistic focus offers tangible markers by which to leverage our analysis.

The ideas of Lacan and his followers are notoriously complex and opaque – indeed it was Lacan's intention in his writing to reflect the shifting symbology of the unconscious, to position himself as cause. This paper may well have continued this tradition in that the reader may find themselves deriving understandings from it that seem partial and contradictory. However, the aim here has been to start a process of understanding, rather than to complete one. If it has aroused a desire in the reader to pursue these ideas further then it will have done its job.

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