

The World News Network: an invitation to participate

Ania Lian

University of Queensland

Abstract

This paper begins with a brief introduction of the concept of the World News Network (WNN), an Internet-based information channel, conceptualised in order to engage academia and the world outside academia in a dialogue designed to challenge the parties involved in exploring the constructs in terms of which they act, and interpret actions.

The extent to which this objective can be achieved depends on a number of factors. This paper discusses the structure of the WNN Channels in relation to this objective. Following Luke (2004), the motivation behind the proposed structures is to create “some actual dissociation from one’s available explanatory texts and discourses, a denaturalisation and discomfort, and making the familiar strange”. The aim is to give rise to conditions which generate questioning of concepts which, prior to the dialogue, seemed unambiguous and obvious. In order to create such a dialogic environment, it will be argued, *its structures must be allowed to evolve* together with the demands of the dialogic communication. This paper illustrates some ideas for such an organic platform which, unlike most educational systems, does not seek only to “manage communication”, but is itself an object of this management.

Introduction

The interest in critical thinking skills, and therefore critical reading and critical writing, has been an issue in Australia for a long time, and has also influenced the educational policies of Thailand. One of the effects of this influence can be seen in the support that the Thai educational sector commits to projects which help to broaden the scope of educational concerns, and, as a result, enhance the quality of teaching and learning. The project which this seminar seeks to describe is the direct outcome of these efforts.

The Thai News Network (TNN) is an Internet-based information channel, and is part of the World News Network (WNN) structure designed to accommodate for a multitude of similar international information services (e.g. Australian, German, French, Indonesian, etc.). The idea of an Internet-based news channel originated with the concern for producing an innovative and engaging learning environment for the teaching of critical writing skills to students studying *Critical Writing in Thai* at Khon Kaen University (Buranapatana & Lian 2002). So far, in *Khon Kaen University*, the model has successfully offered students a challenging, and yet enjoyable, framework for engaging critically in specific issues of concern relating to the subject which they were studying: *Critical Writing in Thai* (Buranapatana 2004). Subsequently, the TNN environment was used with ESL students at Ubon Ratchathani University, Thailand (Intasian 2004). Since then, the project has undergone further development, and hopes to offer its pedagogic platform to other subjects which may look for a different teaching format. It is also desirable for the project to involve other teaching institutions in and outside Thailand. The greater the structure that it forms, the greater the information base created. The invitation to participate is open to all educational institutions willing to experiment with the WNN platform and I make it now to everyone here if they are interested in participating in this project¹.

Structurally, the framework for WNN does not offer any specific teaching approach, nor is it designed to teach what to think. Rather, through a number of ‘tools’ (or means for negotiation that it offers), it provides a platform for eliciting, illustrating, and examining the explanatory power of the frames of reference upon which understandings are formed.

Pedagogically, WNN, with its Internet-based information channels, is conceptualised as a bridge between students (academia) and the communities whose interests they seek to reflect and engage. The objective behind this goal is to involve students in contexts of life which are not limited to the world of the classroom, thus generating an interaction between those contexts. In this way, a situation is created where the methods of analysis employed in those various contexts are negotiated in order to construct more inclusive,

¹ For more information, please contact ania@anialian.com.

and, as a result, more encompassing understandings of the conditions that apply in those contexts.

Thus, the WNN format seeks to offer conditions where the objective is to open up to negotiation the various contexts of life which students' interactions engage as a process for revealing, and attending to, tensions between them. The WNN environment therefore takes seriously the principle of communication as education. Along this principle, we construct negotiation as the context and as the means for evaluating the power of the logics which we apply, i.e. what they help us to see and what they prevent us from seeing. In support of this kind of work, *The International, Multilingual, Multidimensional Database of Concepts* was developed specifically to enhance this process of evaluation. The rest of this presentation will describe the structure of this *Database* against its intellectual underpinnings.

Assisting critical thinking: the International, Multilingual, Multidimensional Database of Concepts

The project to create an *International, Multilingual, Multidimensional Database of Concepts* was developed by Lian in collaboration with the Faculty of Humanities and Social Science, Khon Kaen University, Thailand, especially with the support of the former dean of the Faculty, Professor Sripanya Chaiyai (Lian & Chaiyai 2004). The project was recently tested to various degrees in a number of universities, University of Sydney, Australia, the Australian National University, Australia, and Dhurakijpundit University, Bangkok, Thailand².

The aim of the *Database* project is to provide students with the means for engaging in the sharing of information in more complex ways than is generally done with the use of the Internet in the context of education. The *Database* was conceptualised as a resource structure for supporting environments like the Thai News Network, or World News

² The work of the students from the Dhurakijpundit University, Thailand, can be found on the following site: <http://geocities.com/dpuwriters/index.html>.

Network. The need for the *Database* emerged from the understanding that for a dialogue to take place between different people and communities, each requires a means which would allow them to explore the background of the beliefs or concepts of others. Writing and reading news stories is not enough to achieve this goal. People need a means for expanding the frames of reference in relation to which they judge others. Thus, the objective of the *Database* is to offer such a means. To this end, at the heart of the *Database* is a structure designed to help to organise, write and inspect concepts in a way that brings to the forefront the process of evaluation, i.e. the varied perspectives taken into account by the analyst and the way of working with those views.

Effectively, the *Database* forms a collection of resources enabling their inspection and construction through a process able to reveal the range of sources upon which the analysts build and the connections made between them. The critical feature of this project is the capacity of the structure of the *Database* to foreground the process of construction of concepts, thus revealing, and stimulating reflection upon, the logics which support them.

Intellectually (Lian 2004), the structure of the *Database* is embedded in the view that all our interactions reflect the history of our earlier interactions. As a result, enhancing the logics upon which students draw in the course of their interactions would require constructing of the conditions able to increase their access to such negotiation-generating contexts, i.e. contexts which engage students in affecting the logics which inform the interactions of their interlocutors. Those logics form the object of their negotiation. They reveal themselves to students in the form of communicative demands which students experience in the communicative settings. Therefore, in this perspective, the goal of educational research is not to change students according to the principles outlined in a learning theory of one's choice. Instead, it is to facilitate conditions able to enhance the criteria used by students for approaching and evaluating those demands. This means assisting students in expanding the history which informs their interactions.

In turn, expanding the history which informs students' interactions means enhancing students' access to demand-generating contexts thus increasing their opportunities to generate conflicting presentations of the demands that they experience. These conflicting presentations increase students' resources in relation to which they identify and evaluate the demands, i.e. resources in relation to which they make selections between the structures least and best capable of generating tensions in the logic of their interlocutors.

In our view, independently of the subject matter, the challenge of educational research is in constructing conditions capable of increasing students' opportunities to negotiate their own criteria of judgment against those of their interlocutors. Such conditions, therefore, must be capable of generating conflict in students' perception regarding the conditions which apply in their communicative settings. Conflict, hence, emerges as the central theme of the learning environment supporting dialogue as a means for students to critically evaluate the terms of their interactions (cf. Rouse 1994: 110-11). Here, critical means enabling students to generate tensions in their own criteria of judgment and to explore the possibilities which these tensions open up for them.

On reflection, the above definition is different from that proposed by Luke (2004). For Luke, the critical process involves a form of an "epistemological Othering and 'doubling' of the world" (Luke, *ibid*: 26), "some actual dissociation from one's available explanatory texts and discourses, a denaturalisation and discomfort and 'making the familiar strange'" (Luke, *ibid*: 26-7). On the other hand, for us, the process of critical evaluation engages individuals not so much in some form of dissociation from available texts, but the opposite: in constructing increasingly richer associations between those texts: "The critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles (Latour 2002). Thus, the process of critical analysis helps us to create increasingly richer attachments which form the basis of our truths. We do so by constructing increasingly richer links between previously unanalysed logics, i.e. logics which limit our opportunities for reformulating the object of our negotiations. The more associations or attachments we have, the greater the basis of the truths in which our actions are embedded.

Defined as such, the critical process, therefore, is not about removing us from our history, from ourselves, nor does it generate an epistemological doubling of our world. Instead, our history is all we have available to us when questioning and exploring the potential that it affords. The essence of critical thinking therefore is not exactly in some form of actual dissociation from one's available explanatory texts. Rather, its essence lies in engaging these texts in a dialogue, i.e. in the process involving relating and making choices between potentially infinite combinations of the logics sourced in those texts and to do so in contexts where these logics compete for relevance. The direction of this process is not to generate denaturalisation and discomfort in students. Instead, it is for students to approach the demands of their interactions on a more informed basis, i.e. as a result of the process which helped them to expand the criteria which they use for evaluating the logics which inform their interlocutors. Unlike in Luke, here, *critical* does not mean *aware*. Rather, it means *able to communicate*, i.e. able to enhance one's specific contexts of interaction. By implication, *uncritical* implies inability to engage in informed and informing negotiations. It is this very active side of critical thinking that is of concern to the frameworks of the WNN and the *International, Multilingual, Multidimensional Database of Concepts*.

The environments of the TNN and WNN, with the support of structures such as the *International, Multilingual, Multidimensional Database of Concepts* do not bring with them disciplinary boundaries. Instead, both projects connect their participants from different research fields, languages and countries, and engage them in a collaborative form of exploration and communication. We envisage also that the form of writing enabled by the Database of Concepts offers an alternative to the current academic texts which, as Latour explain, most often remain unread:

This is the point that people who never come close to the fabrication of science have the greatest difficulty in grasping. They imagine that all scientific articles are equal and arrayed in lines like soldiers, to be carefully inspected one by one. However, most papers are never read at all. No matter what a paper did to the former literature, if no one else does anything with it, then it is as if it never existed at all. You may have written a paper that settles a fierce controversy once

and for all, but if readers ignore it, it cannot be turned into a fact; it simply *cannot*. (Latour 1987: 40)

The structure of the Database, therefore, offers the possibility of generating search inquiries which, unlike Google, are very specific and which, like Google, allow the expansion of the inquiry beyond the expectations of the investigator. Thus, the database and its resources allow for a form of interrogation which is:

- (a) *individualised*: all interrogations are question-specific,
- (b) *interactive*: shaped by interrogators, in relation to the specific beliefs that they hold and the specific insights that the act of searching helps them form.
- (c) *interdisciplinary*: the interrogations are not limited by the boundaries set by a specific discipline or subject, thus allowing for multiperspectival and multidimensional exploration of issues.
- (d) *integrative*: the objective is to allow interrogators to inspect and link the various insights that they construct in ways that lead them to more expanded and fresher perspectives on the concern that motivated their search in the first place.

In the next section, we describe roughly the structure of the database.

The structure of the International, Multilingual, Multidimensional Database of Concepts

More detailed information about the structure of the Database can be found on: http://www.anialian.com/workshop_kku_april_2004/critical_tools.html. The categories of the Database are: the topic, keywords, author, affiliation, languages, formulating the question for analysis, identifying the concept for investigation, organising the information, fresh perspectives, new questions.

While the first categories concern themselves with identifying the resource by its general concern and the author, the latter categories have been designed to facilitate the process of critical reflection upon the different logics which inform our concepts. As we said earlier, critical here means enabling an internal dialogue with the logics which impact

upon the frameworks with which we approach the demands of our interactions. Next, we describe briefly each of the categories of the Database.

- *The topic*: The category reflects the general key concept or the topic of the resource. (E.g. dialogue, national anthem, culture, corruption).
- *Keywords*: The category includes as many descriptors as possible upon which, according to the author beliefs, the resource may bear relevance. (E.g. religion, science, politics, etc.)
- *Author*: The name of the author of the resource.
- *Affiliation*: The affiliation of the author(s)
- *Languages*: The languages in which the resource is written and into which it is translated.
- *Formulating the question*. Here we outline a specific process for formulating the question of the resource. It involves very particular steps. Note, every resource is exploring a question, not a statement, or a concept. Concepts are just working tools making it possible to expand the perspective on the question or the demand that generated the inquiry in the first place. We exemplify the methodology of this process in the examples below:

Topic/issue: Installation of condom vending machines in Thailand

Initial question: Should we have condom vending machines in Thailand?

Relevance: Why ask about condom vending machines in Thailand?

Hypothesis: Because condom vending machines are helping us address feelings of moral behaviour in Thai people.

The examined question: Does the installation of condom vending machines in Thailand reflect on the morality of Thai people?

Or:

Topic/issue: Dialogue

Initial question: What is dialogue?

Relevance: Why ask about dialogue?

Hypothesis: It is important to study the concept of dialogue, because at the heart of many, if not all, problems may be our failure to engage in a dialogue and, therefore, to understand not only others, but also ourselves.

The examined question: What makes dialogue a method for including or taking account of others?

- *Identifying the concept for investigation:* E.g.: ‘Does the installation of condom vending machines in Thailand reflect on the morality of Thai people?’, or ‘What are the features that make dialogue a method for including or taking account of others?’
- *Organising the information:* Here one describes the sources investigated by providing:
 - (a) description of the identified sources and the links to the quotations.
 - (b) bibliography and links to original documents (where possible).
- *Fresh perspectives:* In this section, the aim is to review what was found about the examined concept³. In the light of the numerous texts (sources) examined, authors are asked to elaborate on the following questions:

What aspects do the concepts examined in your resource seem to be sharing across different sources? Exemplify.

What are the points of contention: how do the concepts differ across different fields or sources? Exemplify.

Can you detect any contradictions (or tensions) in the ways in which the concepts are approached? Exemplify.

³ See example: Ania Lian, On ‘dialogue’:
http://criticalpedagogy.com/cptc/html/resources/cptc_resou_maint10.php?res_id=43&PHPSESSID=12683d9330f198f164e56a483977bc0c

Can you suggest a way of overcoming these contradictions? Can you do so by linking the similarities and differences in a way that is constructive to the question that the resource is examining?

What kind of picture begins to emerge regarding the question of the resource?

How did the investigation help expand your vision on the question that was posed by the resource? Illustrate your point in relation to the specific sources that you investigated.

Did the investigation help you to generate a new question (or questions) for further exploration?

- *New questions:* Here, the authors are asked to outline the new questions which the exploration of a given concept helped them to identify. In our example, when investigating the question of the features that make dialogue a method for including or taking account of others, we identified the following new questions:
 - How is change to happen in Vygotsky's model of dialogue if the function of dialogue is to reproduce the past?
 - Is Vygotsky's model of dialogue threatened by change?
 - If Vygotsky's model of dialogue does not serve change, what is the value of serving the past?

The structure of the Database provides a dynamic platform for students, and the public, to explore, evaluate and enhance perceptions on the specific areas of concern. Unlike search engines such as Google, a textbook, or most on-line resources, the Database gives access to points of critique embedded in the context of particular problems, very specific concepts which define the problem, and to the individual ways with which the authors worked with those concepts.

Unlike other learning programs designed for the management of teaching and learning, the Database organises neither the content of learning, nor the learning process. Its sole objective is to support dialogue as a platform for generating critical evaluation of the

frameworks with which individuals approach the demands of their interactions. It is therefore these frameworks that the structure of the Database targets. It is these frameworks which shape the dialogue, and which are shaped as a result of the dialogue which ensues. Changes in the perspectives of individuals in relation to the demand which generated the dialogue in the first place imply changes in the demands themselves.⁴ Consequently, despite its rigid structure, the Database helps us to create an environment which is thoroughly organic, i.e. where the structures which generate students' dialogue (i.e. their own schemes of perception) evolve as the demands which generate the dialogue change. It is this flexibility of the Database that differentiates it from the commonly used technology-based pedagogic platforms. The dialogue-generating capacity of the Database is potentially infinite. The more resources it includes, the greater support it is able to provide for all.

Conclusion

The above reflections are an attempt to conceptualise a working model for generating reflection upon the logics that limit our opportunities for reformulating the object of our negotiations. We argued that the inability to engage in our interactions on an increasingly more informed basis prevents communication. We defined critical thinking as a process directed at overcoming such a condition. We proposed the search and the writing facilities of the *International, Multilingual, Multidimensional Database of Concepts* as capable of increasing students' access to demand-generating contexts. We saw this access as offering students an opportunity to engage in an internal dialogue enabling them to problematise the criteria which they apply in the context of their communication, i.e. when seeking to affect the logics which inform the interactions of their interlocutors.

References

Buranapatana, M (2004). Australian News Network: cultural learning. Paper presented at AARE conference *Doing the public good: positioning education research*.

⁴ On other occasions, I have referred to critical thinking as involving the process of 'getting out of the loop.'

Buranapatana, M. & Lian, A. B. (2002). Thai News Network: Critical thinking in a Thai reading programs. A paper presented within the Interdisciplinary Research Seminars, University of Canberra, Australia. Retrieved December 2, 2003 from http://www.anialian.com/TNN_project.html.

Intasian, S. (2004). Engaging EFL learners and teacher in TNN: an innovative project-based pronunciation practice. Paper presented at AARE conference *Doing the public good: positioning education research*.

Latour, B. (2002). *Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern*. Retrieved November 22, 2004 from http://www.ensmp.fr/PagePerso/CSI/Bruno_Latour.html/articles/article/089.html.

Latour, B. (1987). *Science in Action*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Lian, A. B. (2004). *A dialogic model inquiry*. A Ph.D. thesis. University of Queensland.

Lian, A. B. & Chaiyai, S. (2004). *Critical reading and critical writing research project*. Khon-Kaen University, Thailand. Some information available on <http://criticalpedagogy.com/cptc/home/>.

Luke, A. (2004). Two take son critical. In: B. Norton & K. Toohey (eds.), *Critical Pedagogy and Language Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rouse, J. (1994). Power/Knowledge. In: G. Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, 92-114, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.