Social Semiotic Approaches to Examining Online Learning Environments

Stafford Lumsden

This paper reports the results of a mixed methods study following seven online teacher educators in TESOL at three institutions in two different countries. Educators participated in interviews, a modified Community of Inquiry (CoI) survey instrument (Arbaugh et al., 2008) was administered to their students (n=121), and a content analysis developed by the author encompassing social semiotic multimodality theory was performed on educators' online learning environments (OLEs).

The results of the study show:

- Instructors and students view the utility of various semiotic resources (e.g., text, images, video, audio, icons) employed in the OLE differently.
- An approach combining the CoI (Garrison et al., 2000) and Social Semiotics (e.g., Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996) is able to inform the analysis of online teaching and learning.
- There is potential for the aggregated results of the CoI survey to inform reflective practice undertaken by online instructors, and
- The meaning transmitted by written language is often augmented by elements of typography (e.g., font, size, italics etc.)

Overall, the choices instructors make regarding the use of semiotic resources in their OLEs reflect their values and beliefs about pedagogy, discipline knowledge, and content. These findings have application beyond TESOL, to any discipline engaged in online teaching and learning.

Bio

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Stafford Lumsden is the educational designer for the Sydney Law School, University of Sydney, NSW, Australia. There, he leads design and development of units in the professional law (LLB and JD) and postgraduate law (LLM) programs.

Stafford's research focuses on using social semiotic approaches to better examine online teaching and learning as well as professional development for (TESOL) teacher educators.

An Associate Fellow of the Wollongong Academy for Tertiary Teaching & Excellence (WATTLE), Stafford is a lifetime member of KoreaTESOL, and founder of the TESOL Media Laboratory, a global network of TESOL educators interested in developing multimodal practice and pedagogy in ELT.