Hybrid discourse practices and identity construction in social media: The case of a course-based Facebook Group

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Introduced in 2010, Group is a Facebook space where users with common interests communicate as a smaller community. Recently, it has even been appropriated as a teaching and learning platform. As limited sociolinguistically oriented research has been conducted in this context as yet, the paper aims to shed light on the discourse practices of student members in what I call social network-educational space and analyze identity construction with these situated practices.

Drawing upon Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998), the paper studies a Group created for an undergraduate course at a university in Hong Kong. I first collect textual data to conduct a content analysis for discerning student usage and a structural analysis, which includes coding and counting linguistic features found to be prevalent in computer-mediated discourse and instances of code-mixing. A questionnaire is administered to gather participants’ general opinions on the use of the platform. To delve into how the discourse practices are connected with identities, semi-structured interviews are arranged with relevant textual data provided on the spot to elicit in-depth views. A methodological approach informed largely by discourse-centred online ethnography (Androutsopoulos, 2008) is adopted.

Initial findings suggest that students make use of the space for a wide array of activities: seeking help, initiating academic discussions and sharing multimedia contents for extended learning or for fun etc. Instead of identifying themselves with merely ”students” throughout, members take on other roles by deploying a hybridity of discourse practices. Noticeably, code-mixing is one key linguistic resource for these bilinguals to shift their identities. With these findings, I argue the Group can be an online ”third space” (Moje et al., 2004), where members position and re-position themselves freely with such hybrid and dynamic practices. The paper concludes by offering implications to both computer-mediated discourse researchers and educators interested in this emerging online space.

Keywords: discourse practices, Facebook Group, identities.