Small Stage, Big world: Meaning-Making in Television Program

Bo Chang

Recommended Citation

Small stage, big world: Meaning-making in television program

Bo Chang
Ball State University
Muncie, IN.
bchang@bsu.edu

Recommended Citation

Chang, B. (2015). *Small stage, big world: Meaning-making in television program*.
    Proceedings of the 8th Asian Diaspora Adult Education Pre-conference, Manhattan,
    Kansas.

Small Stage, Big world: Meaning-Making in Television Program

Bo Chang

Ball State University

bchang@bsu.edu

Abstract

As one of the public pedagogical sites, Television (TV) has been studied from different perspectives. The purpose of this study is to explore how different players/agents/organisms create meaning in TV programs, and how the meaning-making is supported in TV programs. The ecological learning approach is used to frame this study. Data are mainly from the dialogues and activities in the selected 11 TV dating episodes produced by Jiangsu Satellite Television in China. Paradigmatic narrative analysis is used in this study. Findings indicate that TV as a habitat provides an exciting, entertaining, dramatic, and social environment which greatly stimulates diverse conversations and plural perspectives. In the course of the show, when the topics changed, the roles of the players changed, as did the structure of the conversations. Stories, small talks, performances, talent shows, etc. in the TV program built a good rapport among all the players, which stimulated the conversations. This study draws ideas from the disciplines of media, popular culture, and ecology, and introduces adult educators innovative ways of teaching and learning.

Key words

Interactive learning, collaborative learning processes, informal knowledge exchange networks, entertaining and dramatic learning environment, ecological learning

Introduction

Television (TV) not only entertains people; it can also play a role as a medium for education purposes due to some of its advantages, such as its easy accessibility to people and its power to entertain people and make people feel pleasant (Bates, 1983; Moeller, 1996). Reality TV program, usually using ordinary people without a script (Nabi, 2007), is especially becoming more and more popular nowadays.

TV plays a significant role in helping people learn knowledge, skills, information, gain new behaviors, and increase their performances. The majority of the studies have discussed the function of TV as a medium to deliver information to people or to influence people through the ideology and values embedded in TV programs. There is a lack of studies discussing the process of how different players/agents//organisms such as the host, the actors, and the audience collectively create meanings in TV programs, which is the purpose of this study. Two research questions will be addressed: (a) how is meaning created through interactions among multiple agents in TV programs; and (b) how is meaning-making supported in TV programs?

Theory

The ecological learning approach will be used to frame this study. Biologically, ecology refers to the total relationship between one organism with other related organisms (van Lier, 1997). Ecology studies "the complex interrelationships among organisms in and with their environment" (van Lier, 1997, p. 784). Literally, ecology annotates the meanings such as: co-existence of the individuals in a habitat stably and independently; existence of the overlapping territories with their rules and constrains; an organization where changes occur cohesively (What is a learning ecology?, n. d.). "Ecological theory requires attention to person-by-environment interactions" (Meyers, Meyers, Proctor, Graybill, & Huddleston, 2012; p.110). The cohesive

existence of organisms and dynamic interactions and changing processes in the habitat are some of the main characteristics of ecology.

In ecological learning, individuals actively create and modify the learning territories and self-monitor and assess their learning (What is a learning ecology?, n. d.). Learning happens when learners form a community of practice and carry out various activities in context. Learning reflects the real world tasks and the relationship between learners (organism) and the environment: Learners have the interactive dialogues in the process of carrying out the activities and they mediate the relationship between people and the world (Lafford, 2009).

The ecological approach to learning draws on ideas from socio-cultural theory and chaos/complexity theory. It "takes into account the complex ecosystems within which teachers and learners learn, adapt, interact, communicate and connect" (Syverson, 2008, p. 109). Shin (2006) stated that human learning is not an isolated activity but occurs in an integrated entity; it is not just a cognitive activity, but also includes social and environmental elements. For example, literacy can be "apprehended and cultivated across multiple interactions with people, media, technologies, experiences and activities" (Syverson, 2008, p.110). To capture the full picture of human activity, it is necessary to integrate various elements which relate to learning. Learners construct the learning context based on their perceptions and engagement of the learning context. Through active dialogue, they create learning opportunities in an environment which reflects their learning and life experience (Shin, 2006, p.67.).

The process of ecological learning is dynamic and changeable. Learners jointly configure learning context and co-construct norms, rules, goals, interests, etc. (Shin, 2006). Syverson (2008) pointed out that the ecological approach considers "connections, relationships, flows and dynamics of change over time in the various levels of systems-with-environments" (p.110).

Learners can access the information through various ways, such as YouTube, Myspace, blogs, etc. These environments influenced by technology "are marked by abundance of information and connection, not scarcity; by randomness and spontaneity, not predictability; by diversity and plurality, not standardisation; and by uncertainty, not certainty" (p.110).

The context of the reality TV program can serve as a habitat where learners exchange ideas with each other and create new meanings in the dynamic interaction process. The interactivity of the shows and enabling the audience to influence the show through online forums and other media can motivate the public (Beck, Hellmueller, & Aeschbacher, 2012).

Reality TV uses drama to attract people's attention. It manages the organisms to co-exist independently and cohesively. To grab the audience's interest and attention, reality TV shows emphasize uniqueness, the choice of the settings, the casting of the characters in a conflict setting, the dramatic content, and moral controversies (Beck, Hellmueller, & Aeschbacher, 2012). In reality TV, it is important to select and organize content which relates to viewers' personal experience and deals with the human and social aspects of real life (for example, Moeller, 1996).

Methodology

A popular reality dating TV program, 非诚勿扰 (Fei Chen Wu Rao, which literally means "If not sincere, do not disturb") was hosted by Hunan Satellite TV in China. It was first broadcast in 2010, and gained popularity among Chinese and also some foreigners who speak Chinese. In this study, 11 popular episodes broadcast in 2014 and 2015 and posted on YouTube videos were selected and analyzed. Each episode is divided into five sections for a total of 55 sections. Each episode has five actors (male participants), 24 actresses (female participants), two guests, and one host. In each show, each of the 24 actresses stands behind a lighted podium. One actor comes out of an elevator and enters the stage. Introductions about each actor's romantic

history, hobbies, occupation, and friends' comments about him are played in two to three video clips. Each actress can then turn her podium light off at any time during the show, if she decides that she would not like to go on a date with him.

Data are mainly from the dialogues, conversations and activities between the actors, actresses, host, and guests in the selected TV episodes. Paradigmatic narrative analysis is used to guide the analysis in this study. In paradigmatic narrative analysis, stories are collected and serve as data and then are analyzed to identify the categories (Oliver, 1998). Based on the categories identified, researchers describe the themes across the stories and generalize the main concepts of the stories. This process can be accomplished through inductively generalizing the themes from the stories. In this inductive analysis process, researchers identify the similarities in the data, create categories and identify relationship among categories (Oliver, 1998). Amozurrutia and Servós (2011) specifically illustrated how to use spreadsheets to generalize the themes and establish variables by analyzing the narrative data in the transcriptions, some of which will be adapted and used in this study:

1. In the narrative text zone, input the transcription to be analyzed, and divide the paragraphs from the transcription into smaller sentences.

2. In the variables and categories definition zone, describe and identify variables and categories.

3. In the text mark-up zone, specify and label the most significant statements.

4. In the code substitution zone, convert the marked text into numerical values.

5. In the graphs and maps representation zone, re-organize basic and new information to construct the themes of variables and categories.

In this paper, the author inductively generalized the themes from the stories. Specifically, the author divided the significant content from the episodes into several main parts, and then put

them in different columns in a table, including: Narrative text: Dialogues among participants; Narrative text: Comments from the host and guests; The main ideas in these conversations; and the environment in the episodes. Based on the information initially analyzed in the table, the main categories were conceptualized. Based on the information in the categories, the main themes were conceptualized, which will be discussed in findings.

Findings

Learning in the context of this TV program is inter-connected and spontaneous, and the meanings made through dialogues and stories are plural and uncertain. The TV as a habitat provided an exciting, entertaining, fun, dramatic, and social environment which greatly stimulated diverse conversations and plural perspectives. The main themes were generalized from the data, which will be discussed below (the detailed findings are omitted due to the page limit, see the bold parts below).

Direct Topics, Related Topics and A Series of Non-Dating Topics Are Produced

Diverse Conversations on Culture, Language and Values are Stimulated

Relationships within Group Dynamics are Constantly Re-Configured

Rich Conversations and an Active Knowledge Sharing Network are Promoted in an Entertaining, Dramatic and Friendly Environment

Various Knowledge Sharing Formats Co-exist in the TV Program

Discussions

Even though it is an entertaining TV program, 非诚勿扰 (Fei Chen Wu Rao) utilizes a lot of educational elements and reflects various aspects of ecological learning. As an habitat for learning, the TV program creates an informal learning environment which stimulates abundant information that is plural, unpredictable, and uncertain; different types of topics flow naturally

and spontaneously (Smith, et al. , 2010; Syverson, 2008). Though this is a dating program, plenty of dating-related topics such as appearance and relationships with parents, in-laws, as well as non-dating related topics such as policies on discrimination, laws, international issues, and cultural differences were discussed.

The participants were purposely selected to represent different cultural, ethnic, and professional backgrounds, thus stimulating diverse conversations on culture, language and values. TV as a habitat provides a window for the audience from China and other countries to get to know different cultures, perspectives and the social status in China and in other countries. There were numerous situations where the participants demonstrated the different local dialects of China. There were also plenty of situations where the audience had the opportunity to see the cultural differences and nuances of mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and of other countries. These participants are the representatives of their own cultures and experiences, and they are the living knowledge of their own society. Quite diverse organisms represented by these participants created very rich and sometimes even heated conversations and allowed multi-level and diversified interpretations of the meanings (Xia, 2006).

Diverse organisms/players in the TV program co-exist cohesively. They also actively mediate and re-configure the relationship within group dynamics (Shin, 2006). In this TV program, the guests and host played multiple roles such as facilitators, entertainers, mediators, and educators. The participants' roles also constantly change as the focus of the topics changes. They re-configure their relationships during the conversations and bring them to the fore without hesitation when the topics are relevant to their professional expertise and retreat to the background as listeners, observers and learners when they are new to certain topics. The topics change, the structure of the conversations changes, as do the roles of each player and their

interactions with each other. Learners jointly configure the learning contexts and co-construct norms, rules, interests, etc. (Shin, 2006); the roles and relationships are thus changing and evolving (Folke, Hahn, Olsson, & Norberg, 2005).

The entertaining and dramatic environment of the TV program promotes rich conversations and creates an active knowledge-sharing network and a friendly learning environment. The TV program selectively picks well-known guests, a humorous and sophisticated host, and active and diverse participants (organisms) (Zhao, 2010) and creates a dramatic and entertaining environment to stimulate diverse conversations and interactive and changeable relationships. The entertaining and fun environment makes learning pleasant and allows participants to easily adapt and change and share plenty of information. Misbehavior and off-track thinking are corrected in a friendly environment.

In ecological learning, learners engage in interactive dialogues in the process of carrying out activities; they mediate the relationship between people and the world (Lafford, 2009). Stories, small talk, performances, jokes, talent shows, etc. build a good rapport among all the players. In an ecological system, meaning ties to its relevant situation, and learners experience familiarity (Xia, 2006). Learners' experiences were connected through these stories, performances, small talk, etc. Everyone in the show can find something with which he/she is familiar in his/her life, since plenty of information is highly related to the most popular issues in society today. Participants from different career backgrounds connect to their domain of career fields and their specific networks. Enabling them to show and perform their career-related knowledge and skills can support learners' access to the worlds that are engaged by other people (Barab & Roth, 2006).

Ecological learning integrates the individuals' world into the social norms which are commonly accepted by the members in the system (Barab & Roth, 2006). This TV program purposely created a modeled learning habitat to influence people's minds and behaviors. In the earlier episodes, the TV program mainly pursued TV viewership ratings and purposely selected some participants and topics for dramatic effect (People's Daily Online, 2010), since the main purpose of a reality TV program is to entertain the audience (Beck, Hellmueller, & Aeschbacher, 2012). However, the overrated drama used in the program caused a negative reaction in viewers. Later, the program was readjusted, and more participants with positive views on life from all over the world were recruited. Popular social issues such as chasing wealth, age and appearance discrimination, being unloyal to the family, massive information, as well as today's fast-paced life style were discussed through these participants' stories and dialogues. Learners' perceptions connect to their social and cultural environment (Xia, 2006). Recruiting these participants coming from different social and cultural backgrounds allows the TV program to open itself to the outside world and to exchange information with the outside world through these participants (Brooks, 2003).

Abundant information and diversified ideas are shared in and out of the local space when the learners can access the information through various ways influenced by technology and social media (Syverson, 2008). Learners also have the opportunities to directly access the networks these outsiders brought to the stage through blogs, micro-blogs (similar to twitter), YouTube, etc., which build connections and relationships between the participants and the audience. People in certain professional fields have their own networks in their professional context. Accessing these networks creates opportunities for learners to access the larger context

of the knowledge in these fields (see Barab & Roth, 2006 about how networks have particular contextual links).

Implications is omitted due to the page limit

References

Amozurrutia, J. A., & Servós, C. M. (2011). Excel spreadsheet as a tool for social narrative analysis. *Quality & Quantity, 45*(4), 953-967. doi:10.1007/s11135-010-9406-9

Ballard, H.L., & Belsky, J.M. (2010). Participatory action research and environmental learning: Implications for resilient forests and communities. *Environmental Education Research 16,* (5–6): 611–627. doi:10.1080/13504622.2010.505440

Barb, S. A., & Roth, W. (2006). Curriculum-based ecosystems: Supporting knowing from an ecological perspective. *Educational Researcher, 35*(5), 3-33.

Bates, A. W. (1983). Adult learning from educational television: The Open University experience. In M. J. Howe (Ed.), *Learning from television: Psychological and educational research* (pp. 57-77). London: Academic Press.

Beck, D., Hellmueller, L. C., & Aeschbacher, N. (2012). Factual entertainment and reality TV. *Communication Research Trends, 31*(2), 4-27.

Brooks, N. (2003). Vulnerability, risk and adaptation: A conceptual framework. Retrieved from http://www.tyndall.ac.uk/sites/default/files/wp38.pdf

Bruzzi, S. (2000). *New documentary: A critical introduction.* New York: Routledge.

Bruzzi, S. (2001). Docusoaps. In G. Creeber (Ed.), *The television genre book* (pp. 132-134). London: British Film Institute.

Cavender, G., Bond-Maupin, L., & Jurik, N. C. (1999). The construction of gender in reality crime TV. *Gender and Society, 13*(5), 643-663. doi:10.1177/089124399013005005

Clandinin, D. J., & Caine, V. (2008). Narrative inquiry. In L. M. Given (Ed.). *The sage encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (Vol 1, pp. 541-544). Thousand Oaks, Ca: Sage Publications. doi:10.4135/9781412963909. Retrieved from http://www.stiba-malang.com/uploadbank/pustaka/RM/QUALITATIVE%20METHOD%20SAGE%20ENCY.pdf

Folke, C., Hahn, T., Olsson, P., & Norberg, J. (2005). Adaptive governance of social-ecological systems. *Annual Review of Environment and Resources, 30(*1), 441-473. doi:10.1146/annurev.energy.30.050504.144511

Karnick, S. T. (2010). What the academy can learn from TV. *Academic Questions, 23*(4), 450-457. doi:10.1007/s12129-010-9193-8

Kilborn, R. M. (2003). *Staging the real: Factual TV programming in the age of Big Brother.* Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press.

Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy.* Chicago, IL.: Association Press. Retrieved from http://www.umsl.edu/~henschkej/articles/a_The_%20Modern_Practice_of_Adult_Education.pdf

Kooiman, J. (2003). *Governing as governance.* London: Sage.

Lafford, B. A. (2009). Toward an ecological CALL: Update to Garrett (1991). *Modern Language Journal, 93*, 673-696.

(The full list of the references is not listed here due to the page limit)