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# Commentary on O'Halloran

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# Commentary on Kieran O'Halloran's "Reading Group Discourse: A corpus-based analysis of argumentation and collaboration"

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In "Reading Group Discourse: A corpus-based analysis of argumentation and collaboration," O'Halloran asks: "how are evaluations and interpretations constructed, justified, contested, developed between participants" (p. 2) in reading groups. I first summarize the findings and then note select implications of methodological choices.

## 2. FINDINGS OF "READING GROUP DISCOURSE"

O'Halloran studied the discourse of ten reading groups in the United Kingdom and analyzes it using two software tools. One, Atlas-ti, qualitatively codes text according to different discourse functions. In this study O'Halloran used the tool first to separate on-book from off-book discussion and then to code that material for two functions: evaluation and interpretation. He then coded evaluations and interpretations as claim, challenge, co-construction, and intrinsic and extrinsic references. This analysis generated three corpora: Claim, Challenge, and Co-construction. He then analyzed these corpora using another tool, WMatrix, which provided a quantitative analysis of the discourse. The tool enables researchers to identify keywords and the "keyness" of grammatical and semantic fields in a corpus based on comparison to a reference corpus.

The analysis produced the following findings. For the Claim corpus, there was "a strong tendency toward evaluation" (p. 9) more so than toward interpretation; claims tended to be "made from a first-person perspective in the past tense" (p. 9), commonly with "I thought," and "often […] in a reasonably effusive way" as indicated by words such as "gripping" and "exciting" (p. 9); and it was characterized by mitigation (indirectness or tentativeness in expressing a proposition). For the Challenge corpus, there was still a tendency toward evaluation though less so than in the Claim corpus; like claims, challenges tended to be made from a first-person perspective in the past tense commonly with "I thought" (p. 10); and mitigation expressed by words such as "sort of" was not apparent. Claim/Challenge patterns were comprised of 2-3 turns; "there is little

evidence of challenging leading to lengthy defences of positions through alternate exchange between a proposer and an opposer" (pp. 10-11). For the Co-construction corpus, there was a tendency toward interpretation more so than evaluation; there is high keyness for third-person subject pronouns, usually referring to a character or the author, and for the present tense; and there is less effusiveness and mitigation than in the Claim corpus. When the corpora were coded for reasoning, O'Halloran found that reasoning, and in particular more explicit, unambiguous reasoning, occurs significantly more often in interpretative co-constructions than in interpretative challenges or interpretative claims. He suggests that

> while evaluation has involved prior thinking in the past, nevertheless this has involved a less reasoning response than takes place in interpretative co-construction in the present tense (p. 13).

He suggests a psychological reason why this may be the case: "claims and challenges, particularly evaluative ones, are often affectively and thus less logically realised" (pp. 13-14). He asserts that the "on-the-fly" (p. 14) reasoning based on "embryonically formulated" "interpretative bits" (p. 14) suggests "that the multiple perspectives in the reading groups, and their collaborative ethos, energise explicitly *reasoned* co-interpretation" (p. 14).

## 3. IMPLICATIONS OF "READING GROUP DISCOURSE"

In the space of a short essay and presentation, it is not possible for O'Halloran to cover all topics and issues relevant to this material. Moreover, since the study seems to be an initial foray into empirical analysis of reading group discourse (p. 3), any information is welcome. Thus what follows is more a discussion of methodological choices than criticism. My main point is that it would be worthwhile to supplement this description of broad patterns of arguing with attention to how speakers design arguments for specific audiences in particular contexts. Of course nothing in O'Hallorans study precludes this.

O'Halloran writes that studying arguments in reading group discourse "will illuminate relationships between time, space and reasoning in evaluative and interpretative discourse in reading groups" (p. 2). I think by "time" and "space" he means verb tenses and subjects of sentences; and "reasoning" is providing support. It would be interesting to hear why illuminating these relationships matters. Perhaps there are theoretical, practical, or pedagogical stakes of doing so. It would also be interesting to hear a bit more about why studying reading groups matters. One reason he suggests is that reading group discussions are culturally salient based on the number of reading groups in Britain and the United States. Another is that these discussions reveal how ordinary people argue about literature as opposed to critics and academics (pp. 2-3). Again, I imagine it would be possible to make arguments about academic or practical stakes behind these reasons.

Given that this is an initial foray into empirical research on arguments in reading group discourse, it may not be fair to take serious issue with the size, spread, and randomness of the sample. Issues may exist, however, if the findings are said "to be reasonably representative of reading groups writ large" (p. 3). Perhaps it is possible for a sample size of ten to be representative of up to fifty thousand reading groups, for example, but there is insufficient information in the essay to make a judgment about that.

In this study O'Halloran separates on-book from off-book discourse. In a different study it may be interesting to study the "textual context" (Lucas 1988, p. 249) of arguments about literature–how on-book talk shapes and is shaped by off-book talk about politics and so on. I imagine that the discourse surrounding arguments about evaluation and interpretation shapes these arguments and may explain some of the features of arguing. Take the finding that argument exchanges almost never extend beyond two or three turns, for example (pp. 10-11). Perhaps they fizzle quickly because at times the topic of interpretation intersects with some topic of off-book discourse (something personal, something political) about which members do not want to argue.

O'Halloran points to the difficulty of deciding what is an argument (pp. 7-8). In fact, even in unambiguous cases of argument, the details may be relevant to understanding how participants argue. Consider the example of interpretation he provides: "I thought the main character represented Satan" (p. 3). The context of the argument–including speaker, listeners, and the surrounding discourse–would indicate whether this is an argument in an ordinary sense of the word, or instead self-deprecating humour by a participant who routinely and inadvertently misinterprets, or self-promoting humour by a participant who routinely seeks laughs by generating wild interpretations. Of course these are not the only possibilities, and there may be cases where an argument is both serious and non-serious. The point is that we could learn about both arguing in general and arguing in reading group discourse by attending to what arguments are designed to do and recognizing that they may not be designed only or primarily to make a case for an interpretation or evaluation–to induce belief in a speakers position.

Evaluation of arguments is outside the scope of the study, but looking at their details could help to explain why they fizzle quickly. For example, perhaps they fizzle quickly because they are manifestly rational so it is not possible even to play the devil's advocate well. Perhaps they fizzle quickly for the opposite reason: they are so weak that they do not merit a response.

Another area of future research could be to consider differences among the reading groups. Based on the word counts (p. 4), for example, the female knitters with a male moderator are much chattier than the male prisoners with a female moderator. Based on the word amounts of on-book versus off-book discussion (p. 7), the library reading group never discusses anything other than the book while the knitting groups discussion is more off-book than on-book. It would also be interesting to know whether there are differences in the quality of on-book arguments in the discourse of these and other groups.

## 4. CONCLUSION

In short, O'Hallorans study of reading group discourse begins to sketch what arguing in reading groups looks like. All methodologies both reveal some features–such as subject pronouns and verb tenses–and conceal others–such as context. The significance of the broad patterns identified in this study may become more apparent when considered in light of information about specific arguments designed for situated audiences.

Link to paper

REFERENCE

Lucas, S.E. (1988). The renaissance of American public address: Text and context in rhetorical criticism. *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 74, 241-60.