

HCLS Project on  
“Modeling Meaning in the E-learning Context”  
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Modeling Meaning in the E-learning Context

Biggs and Collis (1982) describe learning outcomes in terms of verbs ranging from the ‘unistructural’ – *identify, name, state* – to the ‘extended abstract’ – *create, formulate, generate, hypothesize, reflect, theorize* (see Biggs and Collis 1982). Each of these intended-outcomes-as-verbs represents a way of speaking (i.e. way of meaning) which if successfully acquired by learners must be evident in their linguistic repertoire. Investigations of how these outcomes-as-verbs manifest themselves linguistically have already been extensively reported on in the systemic-functional literature, particularly in the work of Halliday and Martin (1993). Our aim here is to look at the role played by collaborative learning in a Blackboard(Bb)-mediated environment when it comes to, first of all, expanding and developing the learner’s linguistic repertoire (i.e. its formative role), and second, providing a repository of performance data as the basis for continual assessment of the learner’s achievement of those outcomes (i.e. its evaluative role).

Our first step is to make explicit the interacting systems of choice, including linguistic, institutional, and technological, by which meaning is transacted in a Blackboard(Bb)-mediated environment. When it comes to transacting /exchanging meaning in the Bb-mediated environment, there is in fact considerable complexity and variation. Not only in terms of the subject matter (i.e. field of discourse), but also in terms of those participating, their backgrounds, roles – the exchange taking place between student(s) and teacher, or just among the students themselves (i.e. tenor). The mode of interaction varies, ranging from the synchronous, e.g. text-based internet chat, instant messaging, to the asynchronous, e.g. discussion boards, email, file exchange, course blogs/journals. Some variation concerns the technology being used, e.g. mobile technology, pod-casting. Our goal at the outset, then, is to make the systems more explicit, and therefore more accessible to evaluation in terms of learning outcomes. The insight gained from our analysis and description of ‘meaning transactions’ in the Bb-mediated environment will contribute significantly to efforts aimed at achieving a qualitative assessment or profile of the learner’s linguistic repertoire.