

The Design of Conversational Spaces

Syllabus v1.0

Clay Shirky (clay.shirky@nyu.edu / @cshirky)

Monday 12:30-3:00 p.m., Tisch 445

The Design of Conversational Spaces starts with the observation that conversation is everywhere online, but that its quality ranges from excellent to execrable.

The negative end of that scale is astonishingly bad – moronic rants, off-topic rambles, vitriolic attacks. (“dude just stfu nobody watches ur videos just gtf out of you tube oh no were hurting his little feelings i feel soo bad”.) It's enough to make you wish for the enforced public silence of 20th century media.

Yet not all online speech suffers this fate; many sites manage to host not just civil but productive conversations, from the talk pages on Wikipedia to the design conversations on github to political debate on Comment is Free. Programmers have contentious but respectful conversations on StackOverflow and #winprog; crafters on Etsy and Ravelry; mathematicians on Polymath; pop artists on DeviantArt.

This class is about the design of environments that support or encourage good conversation. We will explore what makes comments on YouTube so bad, and on Ravelry so good, a bundle of differences that includes the scale of the audience, the commitment of the participants to each other and to shared enterprise, and the willingness and ability of the participants police violations.

The class is designed to explore three forces that affect online conversation:

1. Forces that set conversational context (scale, speed, identity)
2. Forces that guide conversations (visual and verbal cues, social rules)
3. Forces that restrict conversations (membership, karma, moderation)

These will be your toolkit for thinking about conversational design. The goal of the course is to sketch out a "pattern language" for the kinds of choices designers make when creating conversational interfaces or tools, and to understand the inevitable tradeoffs involved.

Work

Coursework consists of several design exercises, as well as short readings and class discussion and presentations. **Design work in the class will be in small groups.** This is not a studio class for individual ideas -- collaborating with one another is core to the class.

The first design exercises will be a studies of existing conversational interfaces; you will work in small groups to study online conversations, trying to understand what makes them work as they do, whether well or badly. For your mid-term, you will design a new interface for conversation around a single piece of content. Your designs will be to the degree possible, tested in the wild. For the final exercise, your group will decide to continue on an existing design, to undertake a new re-design, or to design a new conversational environment from scratch.

CLASSES

Week 1 (Sep 12): Tragedy of the Commons

Defining the problem; understanding conversational dilemmas as a Tragedy of the Commons.

Readings: “Common Pool Resources”: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Common_pool_resource

“Fame is a Topology”: Excerpt from *Here Comes Everybody*, Clay Shirky (Handout)

Sites to look at: Comment is Free; Local East Village; New York Times; Huffington Post

Assignment A: Visit at least two news sites that allow readers to comment, and add a comment to at least one article. What did you notice about the explicit instructions for commenting? Implicit cues? How much or little do the other users communicate with or react to one another? Come to class prepared to discuss your observations.

The Design of Conversational Spaces

Week 2 (Sep 20): Identity and the Shadow of the Future

Identity provides incentive for good behavior, a process known as “the shadow of the future.”

Readings: Goffman, Erving; *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Handout)

Theories of Human Communication: Conversation Stephen Littlejohn, ed. (Handout)

Sites: DeviantArt.com; Flickr.com; Canv.as

Assignment B: Two groups of students should pick an environment that allows or encourages user-to-user communication, and examine user behavior in 3 conversations on the site. Be prepared to present the similarities and differences to the class next week.

Week 3 (Sep 26): Audience effect; Scale and Density

Conversation in groups is different than monologue or dialogue, and exhibits different patterns in large vs. small groups. (Groups in Assignment B present briefly to the class.)

Readings: “Group as User: Flaming and the Design of Social Software”: Clay Shirky

http://www.shirky.com/writings/group_user.html

“A Status Theory of Blog Comments”: Katja Grace

<http://meteuphoric.wordpress.com/2010/01/03/a-status-theory-of-blog-comments/>

“If you have assholes on your site, it’s your fault”: Anil Dash <http://dashes.com/anil/2011/07/if-your-websites-full-of-assholes-its-your-fault.html>

Sites: It’s A Free Country(.org); MetaFilter; Reddit

Assignment C: The other two groups should pick two conversational environments and examine and compare the cues those sites send about the nature of participation. Be prepared to present the similarities and differences to the class next week.

Week 4 (Oct 3): Argument

Arguing represents the oldest stable pattern of social software, and is responsible for much that is both good and bad in online conversation. (Groups in Assignment C present briefly to the class.)

Readings:

The Social Life of Information. John Seely Brown, and Paul Duguid (Handout)

Jyri Engstrom on “Social Objects”: <http://bit.ly/SocialObject1>; <http://bit.ly/SocialObject2>

Sites: <http://GaiaOnline.com>; <http://StarDoll.com>; FanFiction.org

Assignment D-1 (Midterm): Work in groups to design an interesting conversational interface around a single piece or coherent and small collection of content, to be presented in class.

Nota Bene: No class on October 10

Week 5 (Oct 17): Social Objects

The oldest, most widely observed pattern in all computer-mediated communication is the tendency for anger to be expressed easily and vehemently.

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Slashdot FAQ: Moderation <http://slashdot.org/moderation.shtml>

“Blizzard Restores Anonymity”: <http://bit.ly/BlizzardAnonymity>

Assignment D-2: Present your interface. Continue work, taking class comments into account. Put an alpha version up by next week.

Week 6 (Oct 24): Public Signals

Metrics of behavior can be attached to identities, as can rankings, rewards and other information.

No readings or sites this week -- work on your projects

Assignment D-3: Continue work on the (now live) interface, taking class comments into account. This is the week we will direct traffic to the site.

Week 7 (Oct 31): Class Discussion of Interfaces

In class presentations of final projects to outside reviewers.

Readings: WELL User Guidelines: <http://www.well.com/conf/guidelines.html>

“Good Subjective and Bad Subjective”: <http://bit.ly/GoodBadSubjective>

Week 8 (Nov 7): Contracts and Cues

Membership is the linking of personal identity to group identity, and to the recognition of the other members of the same group.

Readings: TBA, in response to projects

Sites: TBA, in response to projects

Assignment E-1: Work in groups to design and propose a final project.

Week 9 (Nov 14):

Class discussion of proposals.

Readings: TBA, in response to projects

Sites: TBA, in response to projects

Assignment E-2: Re-design your final project, based on class feedback

Week 10 (Nov 21): Paper Prototype

Get interaction feedback from paper (or screen) prototypes

The Design of Conversational Spaces

Readings: TBA, in response to projects

Sites: TBA, in response to projects

Assignment E-3: Continue group work

Week 11 (Nov 28): Work day: Scheduling and Planning

Describe your working plan for the next two weeks.

Readings: TBA, in response to projects

Sites: TBA, in response to projects

Assignment E-4: Present your idea to the class. Continue work.

Week 12 (Dec 5): Work Day

Readings: TBA, in response to projects

Sites: TBA, in response to projects

Assignment E-5: Show working version of your site or service. Continue work.

No readings or sites

Week 13 (Dec 12): Community Presentations

Assignment E-6: Present your site or service to an audience drawn from the NYU community.

No readings or sites

Week 14 (Dec 14): Final Presentations

In class presentations of final projects to outside reviewers.