Massive multiplayer online advice: Using forums to teach empathy in social professions

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Version: Published

Publisher: © “Carol I” National Defence University Publishing House

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Please cite the published version.
MASSIVE MULTIPLAYER ONLINE ADVICE: USING FORUMS TO TEACH EMPATHY IN SOCIAL PROFESSIONS

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Abstract: In this paper we argue that online forums are a valuable resource for teaching and learning specific analytical skills required for empathetic understanding, especially for students in the social professions – such as sociology, social work, psychology, etc. Empathy refers to the capacity of understanding the situation of another person – that is, understanding his or her definition of the situation and the symbolic universe in which elements of the situation become meaningful and shape actions. This capacity is cultivated through daily social interaction, and it can also be trained in educational settings. Empathy can be improved through analytical skills, consisting in the capacity to identify core symbolic elements of a persons’ situation and then to reconstruct her perspective. A key resource for cultivating the analytical skills required for empathetic understanding consists in the diversity of perspectives of multiple persons engaged in interaction on a common topic. Online forums for personal advice, such as Yahoo! Answers, offer this precious learning resource: they combine a strong diversity of perspectives with benefits of short, easy-to-read texts. Online forums present three additional learning advantages. As opposed to live interaction, which unfolds at a high speed, making conversationalists’ moves invisible to an untrained eye, written discourses can be examined in detail, at one’s own pace, thus being an excellent didactic material. Second, when posting on online forums, individuals often attempt to construct intelligible stories. Last, most discussion in forums have an adversarial construction, facilitating the observation of their rhetorical construction. In this paper we present a method for engaging students in online forums for personal advice with a structured learning agenda, in order to cultivate their abilities to make sense of the specific perspective of the person asking for advice, in light of variability in others’ answers. Students learn to observe discursive alternatives in the construction of a problematic situation – such as marriage crises, health conditions, parental dilemmas. Students are also encouraged to formulate empathetic answers to persons who are asking for advice, and to reflect on the work of discursive articulation of multiple subjective worlds. We conclude by observing that online forums can be conceptualized as massive multiplayer online advice games – engaging anonymous participants in a communicative situation with specific stakes which are influenced both by the technological constitution of the forum (for example, rules for gaining higher status as a forum member) and by the anonymized, mediated, still highly personal social interaction.

Keywords: Collaborative knowledge creation; forums; Q&A communities; major depression; empathy; digital rhetoric.

I. INTRODUCTION

Empathy, or the capacity to understand the situation of another person, is a crucial skill for many social professions, such as sociologists, social workers, and psychologists, be it for purposes of research or for effective intervention. How can empathy be cultivated through formal education, in the classroom? We propose that a useful strategy is to familiarize students with the concept of the ‘situation’, and with the diversity of situations in which co-participants to a given interaction may find themselves, despite their otherwise close proximity. That is, we are interested in the analytical side of empathy – the ability of somehow grasping others’ situations when they are alien to our situation.
We take major depression as an instance of such an alien situation, and we try to answer the following question: *How can we use online resources to advance students’ capabilities to make sense of experiences of major depression?*

The Internet is a rich source of information on every topic – or, at least, it can be. In many instances we stop at the first satisfactory solution that our search engine provides; if we Google the term “depression”, that would likely be the Wikipedia pages on “Depression (mood)” [1] and on “Major depressive disorder” [2]. As teachers, we may discourage the use of Wikipedia, or we may advocate that students go through it and beyond to the original sources and other scientific articles and reports. Students may read about psychological inventories useful to measure depression [3], [4] or about other theoretical perspectives on depression, such as phenomenology or existentialism [5] [6]. Students may also be encouraged to read biographies of people who have been through depression [7] [8] – compelling accounts of transformation, even more so as their authors are professional writers. Other writers have given voice to their experiences of depression through fiction – such as [9], formulating yet another way of making sense of this condition.

In addition to scientific and biographical literature, the web also makes available a variety of other genres of writing about depression – each facilitating a distinctive way of understanding. Teachers can choose from an array of media and representations of depression. We are going to elaborate a summary chart of these resources, pointing to their distinctive features.

The paper is structured as follows: the next section discusses the relevance of the concept of “situation” for teaching empathy, and distinguishes several types of empathic perspectives. We then go on to analyze several types of digital materials and point to their correspondence with specific types of empathy: Question & Answer communities such as Quora or Yahoo!Answers, blogs with visual representations (web comics, other visual arts), and computer simulations. The final section concludes the paper.

II. EMPATHY AND THE SITUATION

According to Darwall, empathy “involves something like a sharing of the other’s mental states, frequently, as from her standpoint” [10] (p. 263). Darwall (*ibid.*) distinguishes three forms of empathy: firstly, there is “emotional contagion”, in which we are inspired by others’ visible emotions, in close interaction with them. Secondly, there is “projective empathy and simulation” – we take over another’s perspective by placing “ourselves in the other’s situation and work out what to feel, as though we were they. This puts us into a position to second the other’s feeling or dissent from it.” (p. 268). This raises the question: how can we put ourselves in a situation that is utterly different from ours – which we have never experienced? What are the risks of misjudging the “appropriateness” of others’ feelings, of considering them misplaced and morally unjustified? This question is particularly salient for conditions of mental disorder or disability [11] – which are often moralized as flaws of character.

The third type of empathy identified by Darwall is the so-called “proto-sympathetic empathy”, when one simulates “not just a person with the relevant feelings, but someone conscious of his feelings, their phenomenological textures, and relevance for his life (...) Someone who has lost a child might be so consumed by the loss that he is unable even to think about what living with it is like for him. So someone simulating his experience would simulate being unable to also. Or perhaps the loss is so devastating that he denies it, thinking and acting as though the child were still alive.” (pp. 270-271, author’s emphasis). In this form of empathy, the situation to which the target person reacts is not comprised only of a set of external elements that defines a problem, a loss, a gain etc. – but also comprises the person’s feelings and thoughts, allowing them to imprint all aspects of life.

This distinction has two analytical merits: it points to the fact that to understand another’s situation requires us to take into account multiple zones and levels of depth: the situation is not a simple combination of several defining features, but it also includes the person’s reaction to the situation, the interplay between what seems to be external events and what seems to be internal formulations of events. It is through this interplay that emotions arise and stabilize, acquiring more and more legitimacy as the person shapes the situation which in turn re-shapes her. This dynamic may appear as a vicious circle, a virtuous circle, an oscillation, or possibly otherwise. The vicious circle is a frequent dynamic in accounts of major depression.
It is important to notice that situations also comprise other people’s reactions to a person – and these reactions may be experienced as supportive, deceitful, well intentioned, abusive, indifferent and in so many other ways. The qualities of others’ answers to one’s situation become part of the situation itself – adding an interactional dynamic to the internal/external dynamic presented above. In order to make sense of how another person experiences a situation, it is important to become aware of the texture of messages, echoes, responses she gets from other persons.

III. DIGITAL RHETORIC OF MAJOR DEPRESSION

What are the rhetorical means available in online settings to convey the situation of depression, with its layers of reflexivity, on the one hand, and interaction patterns, on the other hand?

a. On the one hand, we find rhetorical means that are shared with the printed text: rich textual personal accounts that carry the reader into a different world, in which the usual physics of engagement with objects, activities, and people no longer apply.

b. Secondly, it is a distinctive property of digital materials that they easily invite interaction between readers and authors. This may take the form of commenting a text, upvoting or sharing a preferred answer, or playing a game. This interaction also carries rhetorical power.

c. Thirdly, there are many settings in which authors themselves interact through their accounts, and also with readers, creating a collective authorship with more or less intensities of integration of their different voices. Authors’ explicit and implicit dialogues, conflicts, mutual understandings and misunderstandings are also a resource for students who attempt to make sense of depression.

3.1. Personal accounts

By reading and analyzing accounts of depression in multiple genres and media, we have identified four rhetorical devices that authors deploy to convey the experience of major depression in personal accounts:

a) The “flow of thoughts”;

b) The passage of time;

c) Contrast and conflict structures;

d) Metaphors.

The flow of thoughts, representing a long stream of opinions in various life situations, is a powerful device to render audible the world of a depressed person as it is verbally constituted through words, stories, explanations. The “Depressed Person”, portrayed by David Foster Wallace in a short story [9], is a powerful illustration of this tool: the thoughts of the Depressed Person develop and become more and more self- and other-demeaning, branching into apparently clarifying footnotes that add even more somber undertones, revealing violent self-deprecation: “What terms might be used to describe and assess such as solipsistic, self-consumed, bottomless emotional vacuum and sponge as she now appeared to herself to be? How was she to decide and describe – even to herself, facing herself – what all she had learned said about her?” (p. 64).

This flow of thoughts may be used to make depression intelligible as a self-destructive, degrading vocabulary that erodes all claims of meaning and value. A similar type of violent and self-deprecating flow is verbalized in the digital game “Actual Sunlight” [12], in which the main character writes a review about a video game commenting bitterly (if bitter is the word): “People have taken the fact that it has some false sliver of artistic credibility and blown it out to ridiculousness as a way of feeling better about something that we all know is true about video games: That they are a shitty, anesthetic way that we have spent our shitty, anesthetized lives. Is it not great that the game has ten different endings that require over a hundred hours of average playtime to see – that’s just a way of making you feel like you could be special, which is exactly what you never have.”

Time has a critical role in this rhetorical device: the power of the self-deprecating flow of thoughts derives not only from its intensity, but also from its duration, its unbeatable persistence. Reading the “Depressed Person” takes some time – and it is through this time that the situation of the depressed person can be grasped. The duration of textual abuse is critical for its rhetorical effectiveness. The same goes for Actual Sunlight, in which the player has to go through multiple
scenes in which this constantly deprecating flow of thoughts takes control over his or her own thoughts.

There are also alternative tones for the flow: some are more centred on the *meaninglessness* of the world, the void, the utter lack of any sense of anything – without self-hate speech. This meaninglessness may emerge from an acute conscience of mortality, as it is the case in Guterson’s biographical account [8], or it may just emerge from nothing – complicating the absurdity of the world with its own absurdity. This is illustrated in Allie Brosch’s web comic; her comments accompanying the stripe in Figure 1 are: “The beginning of my depression had been nothing but feelings, so the emotional deadening that followed was a welcome relief. I had always wanted to not give a fuck about anything. I viewed feelings as a weakness – annoying obstacles on my quest for total power over myself. And I finally didn’t have to feel them anymore. But my experiences slowly flattened and blended together until it became obvious that there’s a huge difference between not giving a fuck and not being able to give a fuck. Cognitively, you might know that different things are happening to you, but they don’t feel very different. Which leads to horrible, soul-decaying boredom.” [13].

Figure 1 also illustrates the role of *contrast and conflict structures*. Contrast structures represent mini-stories in which settings that imply a certain outcome lead to a different, contrasting outcome – and this contrast makes visible the fact that the setting was not what it seemed to be. Dorothy E. Smith highlights how contrast structures are used in descriptions of behaviour to imply mental illness [14]. Through contrast structures, we witness the absurd persistence of indifference against the changing nature of circumstances that would invite widely different reactions.

![Figure 1. Reading depression in Allie Brosch’s web comic & blog](image-url)

In a related rhetorical move, authors use *conflict structures* to contrast others’ answers with what the depressed person would understand as a normal reaction – or just to highlight others’ answers as absurd with no alternative, thus marking *lack of intelligibility* as a core feature of the situation of depression. As Wallace formulates it: “The depressed person was in terrible and unceasing emotional pain, and the impossibility of sharing or articulating this pain was itself a component of the pain and a contributing factor in its essential horror” [9] (p. 57).

*Analogies and metaphors* are another rhetorical tool used to convey the vision of an alien, incomprehensible situation. For example, Brosch recalls how, growing older, she lost the enjoyment of playing with her childhood toys: “I could no longer connect to my toys in a way that allowed me to participate in the experience. Depression feels almost exactly like that, except about everything” [13]. One of the most popular questions about depression on the Q&A community Quora is: “How does it feel like to have depression?” Analogies and metaphors are a powerful tool in this setting too – as they are invited by the comparison implicit in the question. Mike Xie answers by analogy:

“Ever have someone update you on something to realize that you don't care anymore because you lost interest, had moved on? Now imagine that feeling of apathy. Applied to every. Single. Thing. In your life. Except you haven't moved on to anything else. As anon has said, you're just, stuck. You'll
nod and say that's ok when someone tells you you're fired/failed/kicked out/dumped as if they had told you that they were going on vacation next week. Ever tug at a loose yarn and watch the whole piece unravel?"

Mani Cavalieri on Quora renders depression intelligible as a digestive parasite, which depletes the person of any bit of energy, while remaining invisible for outsiders. The analogy with the parasite makes understandable and visible others’ incomprehension, highlighting it as a core feature of the depression situation.

A powerful analogy, posted anonymously on Quora, likens depression to the “undertow of the ocean” – managing to highlight, in a slightly different tone, the relational element of the depression situations, as others become visibly distanced and indifferent to one's predicament:

“Metaphorically speaking... It's like the undertow of the ocean. It seems innocuous at first: I can handle the waves; it's not that deep; I can get myself back to shore; I am strong enough. You continue living your life, playing your part, going through the motions of living freely, ignoring the dynamics of the pull, and deluding yourself into believing your status is unchanged. (...) It is invisible. It is silent. It is massive. It wants you to stay with it out in the cold depths where you can't touch and your strokes toward the shore yield so little progress relative to the herculean effort you exert trying to get back to your former status quo. You struggle to overcome its force, knowing that there are people and things on the shore needing your attention. You buckle down, throwing everything you have into the effort to return. When you finally look up ahead to chart your progress, you are dismayed to see how little distance you have seemingly covered, but something else jars your mind: the shore. It's changed. Almost imperceptibly. The people are still there, laughing, playing, picnicking, coming, and going. But no one is looking for you! They've continued their lives without you. No search party. No emergency. Nothing.” (Quora, Anonymous)

3.2. Interaction between readers and authors

The role of interaction between readers and authors’ accounts that attempt to clarify depression is especially visible in the digital games that simulate this condition [15] [16], such as “Actual Sunlight” [12] and “Depression Quest” [17]. Players have to click in order to progress through the game; in “Actual Sunlight”, multiple “Enter” clicks are required to go through one screen of text, creating a relationship between the player and those thoughts, and ensuring a slower pace of reading. Time is a property of the relationship between readers and what they read or engage with; as we mentioned above, duration, persistence, the feeling of never-ending is a key feature of the depression situation (see also the discussion in [6]). Visual representations, humor, gameful engagement [18]–[20], music are also different ways in which readers are invited to interact with the account – to resonate to its version of the world, and start to inhabit it, only if just at the borders.

There are also mobile apps dedicated to identifying and overcoming depression. While their detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, it is noteworthy that they rely on models of implicit users [21] [22] [23] to guide their interaction with actual users, and these models work as some of their main rhetorical devices.

In Quora readers can interact not only with authors’ accounts, but with authors themselves, since they often post under their own names (and sometimes they post anonymously; Quora does not allow pseudonyms). Readers can click on authors’ names and see their profiles; they can also click to “follow” preferred authors, receiving news on their activity in the daily feed. By crosscutting reading answers with reading the profile and other posts by the same author, Quora generates a construct of depression that is a property of living persons, part of their lives – rather than an abstract, impersonal condition. Empathy is cultivated by finding preferred answers and preferred authors, introducing depression as a meaningful situation for somebody who becomes meaningful for ourselves.

3.3. Interactions between readers and (between) authors in multivocal settings

Digital settings such as Q&A platforms, or forums, offer a specific rhetorical resource: interactivity. Not only do we read people’s accounts of depression – but we read them as a collection of multiple answers to the same question, and we also read others’ diverse comments to a given reaction.
We have identified three kinds of interactive, multi-vocal settings in which people talk about depression in the attempt to clarify, for others, how they live in it (but there are probably other kinds as well):

a. **Forums** dedicated to depression. In these settings, people who currently suffer from depression write to ask for advice, and people who are somehow experienced write to offer advice and emotional support; posts are moderated, thus leading to a rather uniform style and to a constant supportive attitude.

b. The Quora Q&A platform: due to its focus on experiential knowledge and personal expertise, using real names as a rule and anonymity as an exception, Quora has created a distinctive collaborative environment for knowledge creation. Its topic about depression includes many answers written with a retrospective account by people (many working as professionals in various fields) who have suffered from depression. These answers present a diversity of styles and experiences, while being convergent in acknowledging depression as a serious condition which is generally misjudged. The diversity of accounts makes it likely that students will find preferred answers, as well as answers which they find simplistic, redundant, or just un-interesting: Quora invites the creation of a personal collection of answers, upvoted and thus marked as personally relevant.

c. The Yahoo!Answers platform is similar to Quora in that it is also a Q&A platform, but is dissimilar in authorship rules and reputation criteria, with clear influences on content. The vast majority of answerers post under pseudonyms, and experiential knowledge is not as strongly valued – although contributors present it occasionally, as a warrant of credibility. Authors on Yahoo!Answers display a much wider variety in terms of their opinions and beliefs about depression and depressed persons. One can find abusive answers, as well as detailed advice claiming credibility through one’s direct experience. The diversity and the occasional presence of misinformed, stereotypical and even trolling replies make Y!Answers a useful setting to illustrate, for students, the *relational and interactional textures of the situation of depression.*

The interactions in Q&A and other collective authorship settings are shaped by reward and reputation systems put in place to stimulate engagement, such as digital badges [24][26], points, and special status and roles. Challenging students to understand the influence of technical design on the actual patterns of contributors’ behaviour and the resulting knowledge formulated on the platform [27], [28] may offer a *second layer of training in empathy*, connecting the situation of authorship with resulting texts, relationships, and reader experiences [29].

**IV. CONCLUSIONS**

We present a variety of online settings with specific rhetorical devices employed to make depression understandable. Such a collection of diverse materials – texts of various styles and sizes, simulations, comics – offers a productive field for cultivating empathy in social professions. Empathy requires understanding another’s situation – but situations are not sets of simple elements; rather, they have dynamic properties, emerging through *reflexivity* (people’s awareness of their situations or their take on them), and through their *relationships* with others.

Each type of online settings presents *specific advantages for training empathy* – by highlighting the alterity of others’ situations, and their reflexive and relational construction. Students can become even more engaged with these settings by attempting to understand the relation between technical design and rhetorical effects, and by interacting with them as readers, players, commentators, and contributors.

**Acknowledgements**

This article has been supported by the research project “Sociological imagination and disciplinary orientation in applied social research”, with the financial support of ANCS/UEFISCDI with grant no. PN-II-RU-TE-2011-3-0143, contract 14/28.10.2011
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