AT FACE VALUE

Why do individual students use emoticons within text-based online academic discourse?

History: Before :) was a message....

- September 19th, 1982 Scott Fahlman used :) and :-{ to distinguish jokes from serious posts
- Next, more emoticons were added using characters on a keyboard
- 10 years later...emoticons became a paralanguage of the web
- Emoji means 'picture character'

(Jaeckel et al., 2014, 156; Phirangee & Hewitt, 2016, 75; Novak, et al., 2015, 1)

Theoretical Perspective

From a Social Constructivist...

Individual learning has a social and cultural foundation
- Interaction & collaboration with other is important
- Emotions fill a gap when the traditional verbal and visual clues are absent.

(Phirangee & Hewitt, 2016)

Also important is the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics:

The element of the Interpersonal is a key theme:
- social presence trumps social chat
- Quality is not indicated by quantity

The nature of the collaborative learning process is deeply intertwined with interpersonal engagement

(Geertsen & Kristjansson, 2007, 215)

Common Themes: user rationale

Expand plain text: More than words alone, in some ways emoticons make it easier to convey emotion because they also introduce emotional distance and vulnerability.
- Tone: to be emotionally expressive
- Clarity: accompany an statement, supplement, eliminate misunderstanding
- Augment meaning: give richness, allow for better interpretation
- Compensate: for ESL speakers
- Shows friendliness: not language specific so can reach out to the interlocutor across culture

(Phirangee & Hewitt, 2016, 74; Geertsen & Kristjansson, 2011, 294; Park, et al., 2014, 156; Aragon, et al., 2014, 223; Urdane, et al., 2015, 38)

Convey social presence with politeness and a supportive environment. Critiquing peers is ‘risky business’ and emoticons can reduce face-threatening tensions
- Support social conventions such as expressing thanks, politeness
- Offset potential misunderstanding
- Softens tone
- Humanizes discourse
- Give immediacy & decrease psychological distance
- Increases positive engagement

(Dissanay, 2016, 37, 39, 43; Phirangee & Hewitt, 2016, 75-6; Geertsen & Kristjansson, 2007, 222-3; Park, et al., 2014, 150)

Enable academic functions: emoticon use often gives evidence of a community of inquiry “interpersonally engaged while participating in the activity of collaborative assignment construction”
- Show agreement :) 
- Share resources
- Offer a new perspective
- Provide feedback or suggestion: ☺️ makes a potential negative into a positive
- Show a struggle to understand
- Encourage a ‘phantom partner’ to engage
- Represent individual
- Bring a collaborator ‘into line’

(Phirangee, & Ye, 2016, 2; Geertsen & Kristjansson, 2007, 221-25; Cambria, et al., 2015, 6; Phirangee, 2016, 455; Park, et al., 2014, 127)

Or, some of the answers to why individual students use emoticons within text-based online classroom discourse?

Control temperature of online interactions. Emotions support “heats up (too cool) asynchronous communication with positive emotions, while it helps to cool down (too hot) synchronous communication”.

(Geertsen & Kristjansson, 2010, 39; Thompson, 2016, 150)

Laugh a little. Emoticons are used to show friendliness, a collegial atmosphere and an element of wit or good nature.

Sarcasm
- Sometimes required to make a message clear
- principal indicators— ☹️ ☺️ can clarify potentially ambiguous comments
- Can let someone know this is literal, or it is sarcastic
- Modify harsh comments with humour

Antiphasis
- contradict or annul the verbal
- show ambiguity-sarcasm or outright disagreement
- strengthen the impact of the message
- emphasize meaning

Playfulness
- display good sense of humour overall
- express recognition of others
- express agreement

Caution: Positive emotions in general do not intentionally indicate sarcasm, but more likely ☺️ is literal praise. Mixed messages may be seen as more sarcastic (positive message + ☹️) but are not often intended BY THE USER to indicate sarcasm.

(Phirangee & Hewitt, 2016, 74; Thompson, 2016, 156; Yu, 2016 From Urdane, et al., 2015; Thompson & Falk, 2016, 150-151)

Application: Notes

For Educators—Model Emoticons

Students are hesitant to use emoticons in academic discussions when the teacher is ‘present’. Students send more emotions along the horizontal (equal-equal) than the vertical (superior-inferior). But, the functions desired by users are valid. Teachers who model and encourage emoticon use may enable a more vibrant dialogue: helping students to fill in the gaps between verbal and non-verbal exchanges.

(Phirangee & Hewitt, 2016, 75; Park, et al., 162-1)

What’s Next? Data Mining Applications

Emotions are domain specific & independent, which means they are useful in:
- efficient coding
- constructing sets of sentiment categories
- extending text mining
- classifying polarity
- indicating informal speech
- discourse analysis of task-oriented work
- distinguishing between positive & negative texts

(Kristjansson, & Geertsen, 2007)

Strategic: users are not haphazard, emoticons are used deliberately for an intended effect

Semi-conventionalized: high level of agreement around broad categories.

But—creative: not a simple one-to-one relationship in meaning or use

(Thompson 2014, 156-7; Garratt et al., 2011; Phirangee & Hewitt, 2016, 83; Freitag, 1981; Debi et al., 2008; Shockland, 2016)

References

Teresa L. Avery
Winter 2017, KMDI 1002

University of Toronto Faculty of Information