

Representing Discourse through Argument Mapping Techniques

Alastair Renton
Napier University, Edinburgh

Introduction:

- Evidence to suggest that amongst the success stories, some online applications are ‘under-achieving’ (Becker & Ohlin, 2006; Lusoli, Ward & Gibson, 2006).
- Purpose of the research is to discuss whether or not there is any contribution CSAV can make to support the moderation of online discussion forums.
- Focuses on providing support through visualisations that incorporate some of the dimensions of deliberation, as identified by Discourse Analysis (Trenel, 2004; Stromer-Galley, 2005)
- Aim is to provide maps of discourse threads, using icons based upon a sub-section of the factors identified as being indicators of deliberation through Discourse Analysis.

Section One: Foreground.

- The perceived elements of discourse that are to be represented within the map.
 - Rationality.
 - Facts, Beliefs, Sources, and Topic Relevance.
 - Interactivity.
 - Seed Comment, Reply, and Request/ Response.
 - Anecdote.
 - Values (this not included in Discourse Analysis coding lists but appears in current argumentation work (Bench-Capon & Sartor, 2003; Bench-Capon, 2003)).
- Why the icons are going to be useful.
 - Depicting salient elements of a contribution reduces the amount of text required, thereby making the individual point more visible.
 - Individuating the parts of a comment allow users to scrutinise aspects that particularly interest them, be they the values espoused, the sources used or the facts provided.
 - Reference to parts of a contribution is easier, and more specific, where a node can be cited as the point addressed by a respondent.
 - Using the database search facility to produce lists of, for instance, unique users, positions taken, and degree of consensus.
- To whom the icons will be useful.
 - The facilitators: as part of the background resources for the discussion; as reference points in stimulating debate; in the production of summaries; in reports to stakeholders indicating the degree of deliberation (Hansard Society, 2006; Simpson, 2006).
 - The users: through clearer depiction of the thread contributions.
 - The consultation owners: overviews of the consultation to accompany detailed reports.

- How they are going to represent it.
 - By using customised icons within existing mapping techniques.
 - The maps to accompany the usual depiction of contributions as a resource rather than as an alternative means of expression.

Section Two: Illustration of a mapped thread.

- Screen shot of thread from an online discussion in its text format.
- Screen shots of maps of the same thread using the new icon set.
- Note the distinction between the ‘thread’ and the ‘topic’; maps should be capable of depicting both – discussed further in further work below.

Section Three: Anticipated Problems and Further Work

- Anticipation of possible problems.
 - Time: once the icons have been prepared, then it should not take long to cut and paste the appropriate text.
 - Objectivity: the map is intended to supplement rather than replace conventional means of presenting the discussion.
- Further research possibilities.
 - Individuals using the icons in a drag and drop type comment interface for making their contributions. People are becoming more used to self-classification when contributing to wikis and blogs, so technique is not wholly alien to them.
 - Some validation could be built in to check the putative content of the contribution, as well as the links that it is allowed to make, thereby saving some of the moderators time in creating a map and providing the discussion with a rational structure.
 - Maps could be based upon particular threads or on topics – this decision will have an impact upon how the contributions are represented, but might prove preferable in the case of providing debate summaries.

Conclusion:

- There appears to be an opportunity to combine the practises of discourse analysis and facilitation through the use of argument mapping, incorporating icons to represent elements of discourse that indicate deliberation. This is an attempt to realise that opportunity.

References:

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