# Reflections on the Particle-based Design for Online Courses: A Perspective from the Course of English Speaking and Debate

## Zhong Deng

Foreign Language School Southwest Minzu University Chengdu, China

## Abstract

"Particle" of "Fragment" is one of the key notions for the ongoing fever of online courses design and management. However, hidden behind the wide adoption of the practice of delineating the course contents into separated "particles" lies voices of disagreement and refutations. This article, accordingly, is intended to address one of the most controversial issues in this regard, namely, the nature of "particles" and the mechanisms that account for the applications of "particles". By taking the online course of English Speaking and Debate the author is experimenting with at a China's university, this article draws a tentative conclusion that the notion of "particle" is innately semantically complex and any simplistic approach is likely to end up in misinterpretation and misconduct in terms of how an academically rigorous course is to be constructed online.

## Keywords

Particle-based online courses English speaking and debate.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The recent decades have witnessed an increasing fever in many China's colleges and universities that high-quality and highly popular courses have been transformed into online courses in a bid to attract and benefit potential learners across the country who do not win the access to university-level programs or who are interested in such courses for the sake of personal or career development. Empowered by the Internet and video clips that are created for online courses, far more people in China are involved in learning what they may otherwise not granted opportunities to learn, and accordingly, their comparatively undesirable level in terms of the knowledge foundation and of the adeptness of grasping the course contents poses a challenge to the course designers. [1] Thus, as to how to make the course contents more accessible and better comprehensible, several moves have been initiated, many of which model on the prevalent practices in Europe and the US. Among the measures that are widely used or highly recommended, the fragmentation of the course contents into "particles" is one of the most endorsed one, signalizing the simplification and crystallization of the originally "bulky" and "integrated" entity of courses.[2] "Particle" in such a context sends a metaphorical message that online courses are essentially learner-friendly, and implies a somewhat vogue promise that all of the learners can understand and catch up with what the course is intended to deliver.[3]

## 2. CHALLENGES TO THE COMMON PRACTICE OF CREATING "PARTICLES"

However, not all teachers and scholars believe fragmentation is the way for the future. There is one major and consistent rebuttal. Namely, how should be the boundary of each of the "particles" (as a well established category) satisfactorily defined? [4] This refutation is voiced because 1) technically, if a "particle" is to be constructed, a boundary is needed in order to distinguish this "particle" from that one and 2) for any "particle", a stable inner structure of framework is needed in order to make sure it stands as a physically definable entity. Here comes

a problem if a "particle" is in line with the two criteria just mentioned. For one thing, the notion of "boundary" is to some degree misleading as recent studies on human cognition and categorization have clearly shown that it is not always easy nor convincing to set up a "boundary" between objects.[5] For example, the boundaries between a wide range of similar colors are not universally clear and stable: "red" in the eyes of some people is not necessarily the "red" in the eyes of others (who may say it is "slight red") and the distinction between so many of versions of "reds" are not possibly there to be located.[6] Thus, the same principle is also true of the "particles", meaning that a reasonable doubt should be cast on the clear-cut "boundary" between "particles" and a deep investigation should be conducted into the nature of "particles" in an attempt to justify the creation of "boundaries". For another thing, as to the relations between "particles" and the course contents as a whole, it will be dangerous to consider that the "whole" is simply or mechanically made up of the "particles" (or vice versa). This is because the current research on cognitive gestalt and its underlying mechanisms for humans to look at the part-whole relations of objects have proved that people have developed a psychologically programmed habit to view whatever things that confront them from a wholeness-oriented/superior point of view.[7] More specifically, empirical studies show that humans do not tend to work on the individually separated parts until they get to know what the whole picture looks like.[8] It is obvious that the particle-based design for online courses fails to address this problem and it is why further investigations should be called upon.

## 3. A CASE STUDY OF THE ONLINE COURSE OF ENGLISH SPEAKING AND DEBATE

In this chapter we intend to exemplify how the particle-based design of online courses may get stuck in troubles though in general this design method is competent for a quality online program. We look at the online course of English Speaking and Debate for two reasons. Firstly, this course is a qualified online course catering to the need of many as it is deeply inter-wined with the pedagogical pursuit of fostering critical thinking in the student populations across the globe. [9] Secondly, this course is not so much concerned with concrete and presentable knowledge points as it is with subjectively-oriented capabilities on the part of learners to deliver good speeches and engage in contentious debates.

In trying to fragment the course contents into "particles" with clearly seen boundaries, we construct two of them for our investigation, namely, 1) the interpretation of the motion of a BP debate and 2) the roles of the whip in a BP debate. As the first "particle" usually suggests, its content includes several points of knowledge such as "what a motion is", "why to define a motion" and "how to define a motion" and so forth. A common practice, therefore, is to deal with the three points one by one by providing theoretic clues and illustrations respectively followed by online quiz and drills. Unfortunately, a two-facet problem concerned with "boundaries" has arisen from such a practice. On the intra-particle level, we are not fully convinced by the validity and legitimacy of separating "what" from "why" and "how". It is true that for some purely knowledge-oriented courses, the three points can be well isolated from each other, each playing a role of its own so as to contribute to the whole picture, but in debate, this artificial separation may be held in question in that 1) it fails to take account of the logical linkage between what, why and how, and 2) it fails to cope with the capabilities required for the students not only to understand what, why and how but also to come up with good interpretations of a motion in accordance with the intentions of explaining what, why and how. And on the inter-particle level, we still find that such a separation is problematic because students are prone to drawing a clear division between the interpretation of a motion and the description of the status quo associated with this motion. In other words, we observed that many students, especially those who newly registered this course, spent significantly more time and patience defining what the motion is

about by rendering large amounts of theoretical accounts of the key words out of the motion but very seldom did they seek any tangible connection between the literal meaning of the motion (the key words in particular) and the reality (especially the problems in the status quo) based on which the motion is proposed. We attribute such an imbalance of focus to the artificial building of "boundaries", as doing so may inform the students with a false closedness of the very piece of knowledge and ability they are supposed to acquire, and may intrigue them into overlooking the interrelations between knowledge and abilities.

As for the second "particle" we experiment with, problems appear to be more worrying. Since this "particle" is dubbed as "the roles of the whip in a BP debate", the delineation of "roles" one by one is understandably what a particle-based design is about. No doubt, the "roles" can be manifest and well presented, and it seems that it is not difficult at all for the learners to know all the "roles" after watching the video clip. However, what surprised us is that more than half students reported that they were not able to render whip speeches even though the clip was clear enough. Initially, we suspected that students might need a period of time to digest what they had known about the "roles", so we allowed them to review the content by repeatedly watching the clip and revising their notes within one week. One week later, we asked the students to deliver whip speeches as the clip of the "roles" demonstrated, but still, very few students could do a good job even though they had understood all the "roles". Why is the case? The first reason, we assume, is that the delineation and depiction of "roles" one by one as a uniform pattern is not desirable, which actually exerts an unwanted impression on the students that all the "roles" are the homogeneous presentations of points of knowledge, different from one another but identical in terms of how they should be memorized. Second, this separation isolated the students' perception of the "roles" as they are from the "roles" as they should play. [10] By this we mean that "roles" are often associated with the expectation as to how well they can be played or fulfilled in a debate; therefore, the delineation of "roles" is essentially tearing students from acquiring the capability as to in what way such a definable role can find its own expression in a debater's speech, especially in a whip speech that has to address almost all the main points and analyses that have occurred in a fierce debate.

## 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the two "particles" mentioned and discussed above, we feel obliged to state that the particle-based design for online courses is sometimes problematic when it is used for capabilities-oriented courses such as Speaking and Debate. In order to solve the problems, we ought to clarify the meaning "particle" by not only embracing its semantic element in relation to separation or isolation, but also exploring the justification in recognizing the logical connections in between if the notion "particle" is to stand. More importantly, it is high time to address the relations between knowledge and ability by working on the possible interface between these two domains. In other words, for a given "particle", it is not possible that it involves elements of knowledge alone or of abilities alone. On the contrary, these two areas of intellectual products of humans are integrated in some way that the current fashion of setting up "particles" does not fully comprehend. Therefore, "particles" should be seen more objectively and employed more meticulous before they are to function well as expected.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

## REFERENCES

[1] Salmon G. E-tivities: the key to active online learning[J]. Journal of Educational Technology & Society, 2002, 5(4):179-181.

[2] Bruggen J V. Theory and practice of online learning [J]. British Journal of Educational Technology, 2005, 36(1):111-112.

[3] Garrison D R, Cleveland-Innes M. Facilitating Cognitive Presence in Online Learning: Interaction Is Not Enough [J]. American Journal of Distance Education, 2005, 19(3):133-148.

[4] Rosch, E. & C. B. Mervis. 1975. Family resemblances: Studies in the internal structure of categories [J]. Cognitive Psychology 7(4): 573-605.

[5] Taylor, J. R. 1999. Linguistic Categorization: Prototypes in Linguistic Theory [M]. London: Longman.

[6] Byrne, A. 2006. Color and the Mind---Body Problem [J]. Dialectica(60): 223-244.

[7] Langacker, W. R. 2008. Cognitive Linguistics: A Basic Introduction [M]. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[8] Crane, T. 2001. Elements of Mind: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Mind [M]. Oxford: OUP.

[9] Siegel, H. 2016. Critical thinking as an educational ideal [J]. Educational Forum, 45(1): 7-23.

[10] Gibson, J. 1966. The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems [M]. Boston, MA.: Houghton Mifflin.