I would like to begin by thanking the organizers, Lone, Berner, and Chris, for the invitation to participate, albeit at a distance, in this panel.

In an address delivered at the 1971 American Anthropology meeting, Moerman and Sacks argued for a new program of study with understanding as its core construct. They raised the following three questions:

What forms of social organization secure the recurrence of understanding among parties to conversation, the central institution of language use? What forms of social organization get participants to occasions of talk to do the work of understanding the talk of others in the very way and at the very times at which they demonstrably do that work? And what are the understandings which those forms secure? (1988:182)

These are excellent orienting questions. In his lectures, Sacks stated several times that their earlier focus on understanding in conversation was largely opportunistic—they directed their attention to recordings of conversation because it was a kind of data that was plentiful and ready-to-hand. Today there are other kinds of interactional data that are equally plentiful. The data to which I am referring might be termed text-in-interaction. It includes all of the myriad forms of textually-mediated communication to which we have grown so accustomed—
instant messaging, chat, e-mail, threaded discussions, etc. Analogous to the audio recordings upon which Sacks constructed the field of Conversation Analysis (CA), these are the primary data source for our inquiries. Our access to “networked learning practices” is through such materials. The practices through which understanding is produced in computer-based environments, therefore, have deep relevance for the case studies presented today.

Pilkington and Guldberg’s report describes a case study of an online certification course for caregivers working with children and adults diagnosed with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD). The course is implemented using an off-the-shelf learning environment (WebCT). The WebAutism course is an interesting case because of the heterogeneity of the course participants, including not only practitioners, but also parents of clients diagnosed with ASD. Communication and teamwork are espoused competencies in professions education, but all too rarely do we actually see communication among care-givers so nicely integrated into the training regimen. Not surprisingly, the notion of community is foregrounded within the set of questions shaping this study (i.e., Do students become a learning community in any meaningful sense? Do the infrastructure and affordances of the networked learning environment support students’ learning? Is there evidence of transforming practice in the boundary communities of family, school, and workplace? What are the roles of students and tutors in these processes?).

The second case study, presented by Vines and Dysthe, examines the introduction of a computer-administrated writing curriculum in a faculty of law. Prior to the implementation of the curriculum, the school had an unacceptably high failure rate on summative, high-stakes exams. The introduction of the technology accompanied by peer-tutoring and a problem-based curriculum dramatically increased student writing and reflection. The research questions considered in this case study had some overlap with those in the Pilkington and Guldberg study, namely: What changes in the infrastructures for learning have
taken place? How are these changes interrelated and related to technology? What indications are there of a more productive learning environment, and what has been the effect of the technology?

How do the questions raised by the case study authors connect to those raised by Moerman and Sacks with respect to understanding? M and S’s questions constituted a programmatic proposal to study understanding, not a psychological matter, but rather as a socio-logical phenomenon, one that is made available in directly-observed action. This is a radical proposal and one that represents a dramatic shift from how we have approached research in education for the last century. But how is understanding as formulated by M & S related to effective learning, the central topic addressed in the two case studies?

We have an assortment of “theories” concerning what counts as learning (e.g., social practice theory, Activity theory, distributed cognition, etc.).¹ Common to almost all of these is a notion that learning represents a change over time and the thing that changes is understanding. If one wished to study learning by way of M & S’s questions, therefore, one would have to study trajectories of understanding. Let us return to these questions to sketch out how this might be done.

What forms of social organization secure the recurrence of understanding among parties to [text-in-interaction]?

This question, addressed to conversational interaction, has been the focus of most work in the CA literature. Structurally, conversations have been studied as

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¹ We call these ‘theories,’ but they aren’t theories in the strong sense in which this term might be used in philosophy of science. Instead they are more like orienting axioms. They are not subject to verification, nor are they amenable to refutation, but can only be evaluated in terms of what they allow us to see.
cycles of activity with interactionally-constructed beginnings and endings. Much attention has been paid, as a consequence, to conversational openings and closings. Within a conversation, finer structural details can be discerned. Talk can be seen to have a sequential organization and turns at talk can be seen as paired in significant ways (e.g., question and response, summons and answer). More basic still are the systematic practices whereby speakers coordinate individual turns at talk. So called “Turn Constructional Units (TCUs)” are a sort of basic building block from which analyzed conversation is constructed, but like conversation itself, they are not specified deterministically, but are instead construed contingently as individual interactional achievements.

Comparable work related to textually-mediated interaction is in its very earliest stages. Garcia and Jacobs (1999), for example, have done some preliminary work comparing the organization of turn-taking in CHAT to that of conversation. By and large, however, the practices by which textually-mediated interaction is organized have been little studied. The WebCT discussion boards described by Pilkington and Guldberg and the Classfronter commentaries described by Vines and Dsythe would be fertile grounds for studying the social organization of understanding “among parties to text-in-interaction.”

What forms of social organization get participants to occasions of [textual (and non-textual) interaction] to do the work of understanding the [text (and talk)] of others in the very way and at the very times at which they demonstrably do that work?

While M & S’s first question could be heard as addressing talk qua talk, that is, how we understand conversation as conversation, the second takes up the practices by which participants to occasions of talk (or textual interaction) assure themselves that they adequately understand each other for the purposes of what they are attempting to do together. Understanding is negotiated sequentially within interaction. In conversation this is commonly accomplished in the
following way: Speaker A produces an utterance, Speaker B responds treating the earlier utterance as a greeting, query, request, provocation, etc. It is Speaker A’s contribution in the third or “waiting” turn that serves to repair or ratify Speaker B’s treatment of the first utterance. Textually-mediated systems must be designed in ways that allow for this kind of negotiation of understanding. This has relevance, for example, to Vines and Dysthe’s comment on the lack of revision opportunities in the law curriculum. Revising the drafts would be, in Schegloff’s (1992) terms, the “last structurally provided defense of intersubjectivity.”

What are the understandings that those forms secure?
This third question is one that has received less attention in the CA literature. CA has concerned itself more with the ‘how’ of understanding, whereas the ‘what’ is often set aside as a “members’ matter. Cognitive science, on the other hand, has taken the ‘what’ of understanding to be its special province. Cognitive science, unfortunately, mistakenly treats understanding as a commodity that exists independent of its practices of production. Not only can understanding not be studied isolated from these practices, by M & S’s formulation, understanding is these practices. We have yet to develop a fully articulated program of study focusing on understanding qua understanding.

It is easy to see, however, how aspects of this program could be fruitfully explored in the settings described in the two case studies. In the discussion described in the Pilkington/Guldberg report concerning early diagnosis vs. institutional “labeling” we see an example of understanding of a complex topic being negotiated. Similarly, in the Vines/Dysthe report, it would be very interesting to be able to trace produced understandings both within the cycle of group discussion/draft writing/peer feedback and across the assignments.

Drawing on Moerman and Sacks’ three questions for understanding understanding, I have argued that we need to attend more closely to the actually
practices by which things that pass as understood are produced in interaction, whether conversational or textually-mediated. Both of the case studies presented today direct our attention to these very practices, but we have much to understand about how understanding is produced in text-in-interaction.

References
