Discourse Community Ethnography

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Audience: Nursing majors and Nurses

**Introduction**

The purpose of this discourse community analysis is to determine whether the academic course SOCI 3341, an undergraduate course that discusses the sociology of disabilities, accurately represents a discourse community. The analysis consisted of the relationship between the academic community of SOCI 3341 and Swales six defining characteristics of a discourse community. In order to properly analyze the relationship academic articles and readings relevant to discourse community ethnographies were explored to confirm proper understanding of a discourse community.

**Literature Review**

**Discourse**

Discourse is applicable in everyday relations and exchanges. As defined by Wardle & Downs “discourse is language in action, or language being used to accomplish something” (2011, p. 795). In other words discourse takes some form of language and communication to present a clear purpose which has the ability to affect daily exchanges whether it may be on an emotional, logical, or ethical perspective. Composition theorists Grant-Davie would most likely agree with Wardle & Downs. Davie describes discourse as “an activity, an event, or a situation rhetorical when it’s shaped by language or communication” (1997, p. 347). Majority of exchanges and events that take place today are shaped by communication or language and each exchange and event presents a purpose to accomplish something.

**Discourse Community**

When discussing the concept of discourse community many may encounter a rather vague explanation. This lack of clarity derives from the fact that there is no particular definition for the concept of a discourse community. Author James Porter defines the concept as “a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated” (1986, p. 400). In other words a discourse community is a group of people united by a common interest who communicate through approved channels. Porter’s description is beneficial but author John Swales provides a further in-depth depiction. Swales proposes six essential characteristics for classifying a group of people as a discourse community (Swales, 1990, p. 215-229). Swales’s six defining characteristics include: 1. A discourse community has a broadly agreed set of common public goals; 2. A discourse community has mechanisms of intercommunication among its members; 3. A discourse community uses it participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback; 4. A discourse community utilizes and hence possesses one or more genres in the communicative furtherance of its aims; 5. In addition to owning genres, a discourse community has acquired some specific lexis; and 6. A discourse community has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise.

**In Class Observation**

The students of the class, Sociology of Disabilities (SOCI 3341), at the University of Texas at El Paso was the community I observed for this analysis. Along with the students I observed the professor of the course, Dr. Angela Frederick. When observing the selected community I utilized the concept of the activity system that Kain & Wardle define as “ a group of people who share a common object and motive over time, as well as the wide range of tools they use together to act on that object and realize that motive” (2005, p. 275). Kain & Wardle provide an activity system triangle that allowed me to define, organize, and observe the interaction between the subject, tools, motives, rules, community, and division of labor. One in-class observation was conducted during regular scheduled meeting times for Sociology for Disabilities, from 9:30 to 10:20 A.M. The community was observed from the perspective of a student, who sat in the back facing the front of the class and Dr. Frederick. The entire time of the course was devoted to noting all forms of communication observed. Notes of the concepts being covered in class were also recorded for future reference.

**Interviews**

Two interviews were conducted while developing this ethnography. The first interview was performed with a student in the course. The interview was conducted after class hours. The second interview on the other hand was conducted with the professor, Dr. Frederick, through e-mail. Both were presented with the same pre-listed set of questions, with follow ups. While conducting both interviews notes were taken, but audio was not recorded.

**Artifacts**

Various amounts of artifacts were obtained throughout the development of the discourse community ethnography. All of the artifacts were provided in a digital form from the professor to the students through student e-mail. Three articles on specific concepts that were being covered in class were obtained, along with a clip of media that was discussed the day of the in-class observation, and I was able to view the syllabus that was provided to me by the interviewed student.

**Discussion**

**Overview**

After the conducted observations an analysis of all documented and collected information was performed. Analysis of the information would constitute if the community of SOCI 3341 is a genuine discourse community centered on Swales’s six defining criteria of a discourse community.

**Shared goals**

The community of SOCI 3341 presented several shared goals throughout the in-class observation and interviews. The general goal of the community is to obtain knowledge on the sociology of disabilities. The interest that is shared among the community is one that takes on the forms of academic interest, professional interest, and an interest in this form of sociology as a whole. The students as a whole share the goal of passing the course, gaining information for future coursework or professional work, and obtaining a differing perspective on how people with disabilities expect to be treated and respected. When conducting in-class observations Dr. Frederick had some of the students inform me on what they had gained from the course, one student who addressed me said “from being in this course I have learned how to properly approach people with disabilities and how we as a non-disabled society make them feel”. When conducting the interview with student Viri she stated that her goal for this course “is to gain a deeper understanding and knowledge on how to properly address and interact with people who have disabilities, so I can apply what I learned to my future career”. The goals of Dr. Frederick included advancing her students’ knowledge on how the disabled community should be respected and treated. Dr. Frederick also made it clear that she would like her students to leave her class differently than how they entered, and that the students would gain various perspectives on the disabled community and who they really are. As nursing majors you are expected to be on your toes at all times, the goals that are set by Dr. Frederick’s class can be beneficial in future nursing careers. Nurses do not deal with one type of patient; every patient is unique and has specific needs.

**Mechanisms**

Communication plays a vital role within the classroom and it occurs in multiple forms. The forms of intercommunication that take place within the course include electronic, verbal, and visual. In- class communication consists of lectures from the professor, power points, electronic book excerpts, and communication between students. External communications on the other hand consists of talking to Dr. Frederick during office hours, e-mails between students and the professor, students’ miner e-mail (student e-mail), and Blackboard ( class website).

According to John Swales “the participatory mechanism will vary according to the community: meetings, telecommunications, correspondence, newsletters, conversations and so forth” (1990, p. 221). The various mechanisms presented within this community have its own purpose. The verbal forms of communication utilized such as the lectures provide students with brand-new information and it allows the professor to clear up any misunderstandings within the classroom. For example when conducting the in-class observation some of the students within the community were misunderstanding the concept of inspiration porn, which describes how media misuses “inspirational” stories of non-disabled people helping disabled people to make their audience feel warm inside. Visual forms of communication such as media clips and power points support the verbal lectures for those students who may find a concept difficult to understand just verbally.

One vital characteristic of a discourse community is its lexis. Lexis is a specialized set of terms that are used within the communication of a certain community. Each discourse community consists of its own specific lexis. For example the lexis that is used with in SOCI 3341 consists of terms such as “inspiration porn” , “Caitlyn Jenner”, “transgender”, “disabilities”, “freak show”, and so on.

Another characteristic that plays a vital role in discourse communities is genres. According to Swales who quoted (Martin, 1985:250) “genres are how things get done, when language is used to accomplish them” (1990, p. 221). When the students of SOCI 3341 enter the classroom they are expected to take their seats and have read the reading of piece of media that was sent out (through e-mail or Blackboard) to them days in advance to prepare for the class. Dr. Frederick will then present he power point to the class and present a brief review over the discussions of the previous class. The students are expected to participate in class discussion based on information from the previous class and assigned readings or media. For example during the in-class observation Dr. Fredrick discussed a previous article that the students had read about a Mc Donald’s employee cutting the food for a disabled man. After reviewing the article she then asked the student “why is this an example of inspiration porn?” the students were then expected to interact with Dr. Frederick in describing why it may be considered inspiration porn. One interesting observation that I did make is that Dr. Frederick has a disability herself but it does not in any form affect the amount of communication taking place, rather instead of the students raising their hands the are free to openly ask questions and respond to questions as they please (not all at once though). As nursing majors this is beneficial in the medical field because knowing how to carry out certain communications with a disabled patient can help them feel more at ease rather than feeling embarrassed or frustrated.

**Group Dynamic**

The communication within the classroom is outstanding. There is a strong representation of student-to-student, student-to-teacher, and teacher-to-student interaction. During the in-class observation Dr. Frederick continuously confirmed with the class if they understood the concept fully and if someone did not she would stop and take the time to explain more in depth. There was no lack of student interaction, the students would ask questions and participate in the discussion.

**Level of expertise**

The level of expertise is not difficult to distinguish within SOCI 3341. At the top of the ladder is Dr. Frederick who is the professor of the course. Dr. Frederick provides the students with their grades, assignment feedback, and rules for the course which are covered within her syllabus. Right behind the professor on the ladder is the students. The student structure depends on how the students grasp the concepts, and how they communicate not only with each other but with Dr. Frederick. Those students who continuously ask questions and participate in class discussions are the students who master the concepts and do well.

**Conclusion**

**Fulfillment of Swales’ Six Characteristics**

The first requirement of Swales’ characteristics is that a discourse community must have a set of shared goals. The community of SOCI 3341 share several clearly displayed public goals. SOCI 3341 presents various forms of mechanisms that can be used for communication within the course. The third requirement is that a discourse community should consist of participatory mechanisms. Various mechanisms are used within this community to receive feedback, assignments, and to inform students. In the community genres are present in the form of asking the students open ended questions to begin to build a strong class discussion. Lexis is clearly present within the SOCI 3341 course; specialized terms are found within the readings, media, and power points. The last requirement is that the community must consist of experts of the discussed subject. At this point in the semester the students cannot be categorized as experts but by the time the semester does end they will leave with much more knowledge on the sociology of disabilities than what they began with. Dr. Frederick may not be considered and expert but she does have her doctorates degree with does qualify her to teach the course which means she must know much more than the average person does about the sociology of disabilities. Not only that but Dr. Frederick personally deals with having a disability therefore she understands first-hand what it is like to live in largely populated non-disabled society. The argument can be made that SOCI 3341 is a true discourse community.

**Limitations of the study**

One flaw of the discourse community ethnography was that the time frame to conduct observations was too limited. It was challenging to determine whether the selected community consisted of experts because each student will be leaving the course with different levels of concept comprehensions and mastery. The analysis could have been improved by having the time to conduct follow up interviews with students and Dr. Frederick. Another improvement that could have been made was applying the learned concepts to real situations. One concept that was slightly touched on was how the transgender community and homosexuals were seen as freak shows. UTEP recently held a Queernival and if more time had been given for observations it is possible I could have applied the concepts taught to how the Queernival was conducted.

References

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