The role of participant discourse in online community formation

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1. Introduction

What amazed me wasn’t just the speed with which we obtained precisely the information we needed to know, right when we needed to know it. It was also the immense inner sense of security that comes with discovering that real people…are available, around the clock, if you need them. There is a magic protective circle around the atmosphere of this particular conference.


1.1 Speech Community – Discourse Community

The phenomenal growth of communication through computers, known as Computer Mediated Communication (henceforth CMC), has gone hand–in–hand with the widespread use of the global network of the Internet. Digital technology has marked the era of the instant transmission of information, text and knowledge around the world, and today millions of people are engaged regularly in text–based CMC. Computer Mediated Communication by challenging structures, practices, and cultural ideas has made a significant effect on the presentation of ‘the self’ and the perception of ‘others’, thus stimulating an enormous interest among trans–disciplinary experts on social interaction, eager to discover the dynamics of online behaviour in virtual and mediated environments. Furthermore, by displaying new types of text that exhibit semantic and syntactic innovation, CMC has challenged what are commonly known as modes of oral and written discourse and has become a new form of communicative practice among online participants.
Digital technology has also provided a window on the processes of community formation on the Internet, facilitating its development while challenging the traditional concept of ‘community’, defined as a limited geographic area quite similar to a neighbourhood. Even in the presence of community members that differ from one another in terms of age, culture, economic benefits, language and other features that would possibly hinder communication in the physical world, these ‘social aggregations’ emerging from the Internet (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5), attract more and more people from all corners of the world, who are interested in ‘talking’ to others with similar social needs, such as obtaining information, developing new friendships and sharing knowledge, with just a click of a few keys.

It is a well–known fact that participation is the life of any community and without contributions from its members, the community itself would probably cease to exist. However, in order to generate participation, a community’s rules and practices must be made explicit to its incoming members, which implies their full involvement and understanding of what membership requires. The definition of a ‘community of practice’ offered by Lave and Wenger is probably the closest instrumental description of community belongingness. The authors argue that members who ‘have different interests, make diverse contributions to activities and hold varied viewpoints’ are part of a community of practice. They further specify that the essential characteristic of membership is ‘participation in an activity system, about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities’ (Lave and Wenger, 1999, p. 23).

All of the members of the Australian and the International Communities in this study came together in a course–based virtual environment to create a ‘community of practice’, their intention being the acquisition of e–moderating skills for online teaching. The educational nature of the goal provided the framework within which the participants shared their previous experiences as educators in various domains, and despite their individual differences and interests, they fully participated in the community by engaging in activities that led to group solidarity and socialization, albeit within a limited period of time.