

Theory and Praxis in an Educational Setting: Building Community Online

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we present findings from our theoretical and applied work in an educational setting, namely the online master's program in anthropology at the University of North Texas (UNT). This program, the first of its kind, was developed under Wasson's leadership, and Cardew is a student in the first cohort, which started in 2006.

Since the program is so new, we are still experimenting with ways to make it equal in quality to UNT's highly regarded on-campus master's program in anthropology. One area of our attention is the question of how to build community in the online program. We believe that an important aspect of graduate school – as critical as the classes themselves – is students' entry into a community of practice, through which they can develop peer and mentoring relationships, access professional networks, and learn the cultural norms and practices of applied and practicing anthropologists (Lave and Wenger 1991). Furthermore, the literature on distance learning has highlighted the importance of discovering “how a sense of community can be stimulated in virtual classrooms [because]... Strong feelings of community increase the flow of information among all learners, the availability of support, commitment to group goals, cooperation among members, and satisfaction with group efforts” (Rovai 2001:33, see also Bruffee 1993, Dede 1996, Wellman 1999).

In our on-campus master's program, the students build community without any conscious effort on the part of the faculty. However, when we started the online

program, we noticed that patterns of interaction were quite different, and we wanted to understand if our goals for community were being met, and if not, how we might intervene.

In fall 2006, Wasson embarked on a research project comparing online and on-campus student experiences, and hired Cardew as a research assistant. The goal of the project was to develop theoretically informed understandings that could be applied to the online master's program in anthropology, as well as other online programs at UNT.

2. The organizational setting

The University of North Texas (UNT) is the leading public university in North Texas. While it is mainly a traditional bricks-and-mortar learning institution, it has also become a leading purveyor of online education (Turner 2001). Faculty have developed more online courses than any other Texas university. They are guided by UNT's Center for Distributed Learning, which offers an array of theoretical and practical resources to all online programs.

Distance education provides a way to reach out to potential students who face various constraints in their lives. Our online program was designed to serve people who were unable to attend an on-campus master's program due to geographic, work and/or family constraints. We also hoped to attract students with diverse backgrounds who have been historically underrepresented in anthropology. Our approach was to use innovative pedagogy to maintain the strengths of face-to-face education, while making it accessible to a wider audience.

3. The project: data collection

For this research project, we collected ethnographic and linguistic data on student experiences in two versions of the same course, one on-campus and one online. The project originated when Wasson taught her first online class in fall 2006, and became fascinated by differences between that class and the on-campus version of the same course that she was teaching at the same time. It seemed clear that the medium of instruction had a significant effect on students' experiences, even when everything else about the two courses was held constant – same professor, readings, assignments, discussion topics, and so forth. Wasson quickly went through the IRB process and collected research data on the two classes. Surprisingly, we have found no prior studies in the distance learning literature that feature this kind of controlled comparison, with so many factors between the online and on-campus courses held constant.

The course was ANTH 5010 Anthropological Thought and Praxis 1, providing this paper with a pleasingly recursive quality – not only are we reporting on theory and practice in our own work, but we are also describing a class in which the students were learning about theory and practice.

The course was mainly organized as seminar-style discussion, designed to develop students' critical analysis skills. Each student was responsible for leading class discussion for one week. The course followed a “constructivist” approach, a term in the educational literature which means that students are made responsible for co-constructing knowledge themselves, rather than having the professor convey knowledge via lectures (Whittle 2000). In both classes, the professor, Wasson, expected the students to guide the discussion. From the transcripts of the class meetings and discussion board it is clear that

students conducted the majority of exchanges, and Wasson's role was to guide discussions when they got off-topic.

The on-campus class met every Monday evening from 6-8:50 pm, as you can see in this picture. The online class was taught via the distance learning technology of WebCT. Key components of the class included short introductory lessons, an interactive activity in which students created intellectual genealogies for key anthropologists, an online discussion area with asynchronous discussion boards, and a weekly one-hour teleconference.

For our data collection, we captured a record of all class discussions in weeks 10-12. For the on-campus class, this meant videotaping and transcribing the weekly class meeting. For the online class, this meant audio recording the weekly teleconference, and downloading the online discussions. In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews with all students, which were audio recorded and transcribed. There were nine students in the online class, and 12 students in the on-campus class.

4. Developing a Theoretical Framework for Building Community

We examined both the interviews and the class discussions in order to identify students' perceptions and practices in regard to community-building. During the initial phase of our analysis, we noticed that certain forms of community-building among on-campus students were lacking in the online class. On-campus students spent a lot of face-to-face time with each other outside of class, in the TA room, in coffee shops, during smoke breaks, and so forth. During this time, they engaged in a complex mix of social and intellectual conversations. Many of the on-campus students valued these interactions

because they got to know each other so well. This comfort was visible in class through, for instance, students' readiness to joke with each other (Wasson et al. 2007).

The online students had a different pattern of interactions. They attended a face-to-face orientation on the UNT campus prior to the start of the program, which was designed to promote quick bonding within the cohort. In interviews, the online students said that this meeting was a pivotal time for them to develop ties with each other.

Once the online class began, students mainly interacted with each other via the asynchronous discussion board and the weekly teleconference. The majority did not have much contact outside of class.

These patterns led to significant differences in community-building between online and on-campus students. The kinds of personal conversations that on-campus students engaged in outside of class moved *inside* the class for online students. Online students passionately shared their personal philosophies and the deep questions they were exploring, in a way that brought them close together. Furthermore, according to our interview data, online students spent significantly more hours a week in class discussions than the weekly 3-hour meeting of the on-campus seminar.

In analyzing community-building among online students, we therefore focused on interactions that occurred within the class context. As a heuristic tool, we drew on a common framework from the literature on distance learning that divides students' postings into two types: "cognitive," which contribute to the co-construction of knowledge, and "social," which establish rapport and social presence (Gunawardena 1997:404; see also Black 2005, Ertmer et. al 2007, Garrison and Anderson 2003, Henri 1992, Kanuka and Garrison 2004).

In our data, the online students engaged in both forms of postings in ways that contributed to the development of community. With regard to the cognitive aspect, we found that online discussions often reached a higher level of sophistication than the on-campus discussions. This was facilitated by the affordances of revisability and reviewability, which are unique to online discussions (Clark and Brennan 1991, Wasson et al. 2007). Online students were able to edit, rewrite, and polish their messages before sending them. This advantage of online discussions has been identified in other studies as well (Garrison and Anderson 2003, Lapadat 2002, Kanuka and Garrison 2004, Whittle et al. 2000).

Furthermore, as part of their process of co-constructing knowledge, students sometimes shared deeply personal, passionate questions and philosophies about anthropology and their life goals. Here is an example of a discussion board post from a thread where students were discussing their thoughts about Nader and how they might use the approach of studying up:

From Jane:

First, I wanted to say that I think Katy and Beth make excellent points and provide very good summaries and analysis of Nader's studying up, its influences, and comparisons to other concepts. I personally found it fascinating that I could not necessarily identify with Nader on some of her more political and activist perspectives and charges, but yet identify with and be inspired - as Katy said - by this concept... I think I will definitely be including this concept in my toolkit.

As you can see in this example, Jane had read and was responding to posts that Katy and Beth had made about the utility of Nader's approach. Despite her own political beliefs, she had found Nader's approach to be influential and meaningful. It seems as though Katy and Beth's posts helped Jane to identify aspects of Nader's theory that she

liked. Such conversations simultaneously contributed to the students' cognitive learning and to building community.

Here is a quote from an interview in which an online student describes how the discussion board postings helped her explore her career goals through discussions with classmates:

Just feeling like after a lot of time trying to figure out where I wanted to be academically, **really** feeling like the goals of the people that I was talking to, matched a lot of what my goals were. That really helped me.

At the same time, students also engaged in postings of a social nature. For instance, they sent messages of support to each other, and apologized when circumstances forced them to be absent from a discussion for a while. Here is an example of a student, Tina, apologizing on Friday to Jane, the week's discussion leader, for not posting comments about a report that had been uploaded on Monday:

From Tina:

Hi Jane, Just wanted to let you know that I'll post something by this evening....I'm swamped with [another online course] stuff and my brain is slowly starting go on strike. It took me an hour to read on page of Nader (and she's not a difficult read!!!!) Just wanted to let you know.

From Jane:

Thanks, Tina. I totally sympathize. I feel like my brain is slowly turning to mush these days.

In this example, we can see a student reaching out to the discussion leader to explain her uncharacteristic silence, and the discussion leader's empathetic response.

Here is another interview quote in which a student is describing how the discussion board posting helped her to feel closer to her classmates:

We were all **very** encouraging to each other, supportive of each other even if we didn't agree, it was always softly put...because it was a learning process and we were getting to know each other, but it just made for a really comfortable environment posting, it really felt like you were part of a class.

Socially oriented postings thus also contributed to the development of community. In addition, the online students identified their weekly teleconferences as an important venue for feeling connected.

Finally, our analysis is still ongoing. We have started to work with a professor in UNT's School of Education who is helping us code the online and on-campus class discussions so that we can engage in quantitative analysis. At this point, we are not yet sure whether, in the end, online students are experiencing fewer of the benefits of community. Longitudinal study will clarify this issue.

5. The Practice of Building Community

Our applications of these ideas about community are ongoing and in process. Here is a summary of steps we have taken.

On October 9, 2007 we presented preliminary findings from our research to the Department of Anthropology and the Center for Distributed Learning at UNT. Two of our recommendations especially pertained to community. We recommended that when designing online classes, faculty take advantage of the potential for in-depth, student-driven discussion, as it helps to foster a classroom community (Rovai 2001). Secondly, we recommended teleconferences as a supplement to discussion boards, since they help students feel connected to each other. At that time, we had not analyzed the issue of building community as extensively as we have now. We are scheduled to make another presentation on May 15, where we will share today's material as well our findings from the quantitative analysis which is currently in progress.

As director of the online master's program, Wasson also took a number of practical steps to bring online students into the broader departmental community. Some of these preceded the research, and their success has been mixed. Already in planning the program, community was a major concern, so Wasson designed a virtual community for students and faculty, called the Cosmic Café. The Café was used a great deal for the first six months or so, but since then conversation has become minimal. Likewise, an email list for students and faculty was created, but it is not heavily used for conversations.

Until recently, we were confused and concerned about why there was so little discussion outside of classes. One possible answer was that students might feel monitored by faculty in the settings we created. However, we encouraged them to create their own, separate email lists or other virtual contexts, and they did not do so. The first cohort of students did sometimes send group emails to each other, but usually in reference to specific issues relating to their classes. Another explanation was that students were simply busy; most of them had full-time jobs and some had children as well. In retrospect, a key part of the explanation may be the insight from our study that a fair amount of community-building moves inside the class context for online students.

A second way that we have tried to bring online students into the departmental community is that, starting in fall 2007, we have made various kinds of departmental presentations available to online students. Events have included guest speakers and the practicum presentations of graduating students. We have posted video recordings of these talks in the Cosmic Café, and we have also made them accessible to online students

in real-time via teleconference and application sharing. These efforts seem to be well received; it is too early to evaluate their success.

We are still in the process of learning how to build community online, and expect to keep adding new insights over time.

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