

Article Critique

Judith Lapadat (2007) begins her research article by explaining “as university courses go online, faculty have the opportunity to re-design their teaching to reflect the philosophical shift to social and cognitive constructivism that underlies much current thinking about best educational practices” (p. 59). She focuses her thesis by defining three specific ideas: identifying and describing “the discursive devices and strategies that participants in an asynchronous, interactive, text-based, university course used to establish and maintain community, create coherent academic discussions, and negotiate meaning” (p. 60). She begins her literature review by explaining that the medium of electronic communication is becoming a change force in higher education and that “computer-mediated communication in online learning can facilitate for egalitarian discussion and enhance critical thinking” (p. 60). Then, she explains that interactive written discourse, the primary communication method in online learning, is a “newly emerging register with characteristics of both written and spoken language” (p. 61).

In her literature review Lapadat (2007) describes a three-step process through which online community evolves: (a) forming friendships online, (b) community membership through engagement in long threaded discussions, and (c) camaraderie achieved through long-term and intense personal communication. This is very similar to her own understanding of how community forms and how discussion strengthens community and learning. Lapadat (2007) also includes such notions as “geographic closeness is not an essential characteristic of communities” but rather community is “mutual interdependence along members, spirit, trust, common expectations, and shared values and beliefs” (p. 62); “students’ perspectives of degree of community have not been significantly different in the face-to-face and CMC contexts”; and “community is the basis of trust and safety, comfort, familiarity, dependence, tolerance, and

ease” (p. 63). Lapadat (2007) acknowledges criteria that prevent the formation of community: insufficient number of engaged participants, perceived instructor absence, inappropriate instructional approach, optional nature of online forum, unclear expectations about online collegiality, and few opportunities for social communication.

Lapadat’s (2007) thorough literature review makes the case for the importance of community, discourse coherence techniques, and knowledge construction through agreement or disagreement in discussion. She describes three categories of responses in online conferences that contribute to a sense of social presence: affective, interactive, and cohesive responses. The literature review concludes by describing the necessity for creating a safe space.

Lapadat (2007) deduces that “discursive agreement and disagreement patterns are an interesting focus for analysis as they provide an insight into rhetorical strategies and debates about meaning, as well as participants’ strategies for negotiating different perspectives without impairing the online community” (p. 65). She emphasizes her case study as one that employs discourse analysis to examine the CMC within a course conference in order to identify discourse devices used by participants to establish community and create coherence, as well as discursive patterns of negotiating agreements and disagreements (2007).

Lapadat’s (2007) research setting is an online course that uses asynchronous discussion, with six students who had not participated in an online discussion-based course before. All electronic posts made during the semester-long class were inductively coded for devices used to establish and maintain community, and devices participants used to create a sense of coherence in the online discussions. She analyzed discussions for patterns of agreement and disagreement between students. Five of six students were female which may not constitute a neutrally representative sample. The small sample size could be considered a weakness. While her

qualitative study does yield interesting and useful results, it may not be generalizable to the typically larger online classes.

Through her research, Lapadat (2007) identifies thirteen discourse devices that promoted the development of community including use of greetings, references to social situations outside of the course, use of colloquialisms and teacher jargon, social comments, self-disclosure, anecdotal asides, requests for or offers of help, supportive remarks, use of humor, invitations to comment, use of inclusive language, alignment, and use of familiar genres. Lapadat (2007) notes that these strategies “can be seen as community building in that they introduce personal elements into the discussion, promote inclusion and a feeling of safety, and give participants a sense of ownership of the topics” (p.67) and also observes “participants avoided using derogatory or negative personal remarks” (p. 67).

Lapadat (2007) groups multiple devices based on how they fit together and their functions in building community. Social remarks, invitations, and asides were used for the purpose of socializing and were typically confined to the introduction or termination of a message, served to bracket more academic writing, and added a human touch (Lapadat, 2007). Requests for help and invitations to comment were infrequent but were typically taken up by at least one student. Humor, as well as supportive and encouraging comments, were used frequently by all students during the course. Lapadat (2007) observed that unless writing needed to be formal, as in the case of article presentations, students tended to use colloquialisms or otherwise mimic the writing style of short stories or letters. Students also used inclusive language, alignment and disclosure as community building devices. The pronouns “we” and “us” referred to the collective online community in the course as well as the larger group of practitioners in the education field. Students used alignment to agree and identify with another student’s point of

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view and experience. Students frequently used anecdotes in the class to personalize contributions and to explain the practical implications of theoretical issues from readings. As the course progressed, course members began to share more personal and emotional examples from their own lives. Lapadat (2007) deduces that these were signs that the students felt safe in this online environment and that community had formed.

Lapadat (2007) presents a strong set of discourse devices used for establishing community. It is unclear whether other factors in the course may have contributed to the establishment of this community and whether discourse devices deserve as much credit as they receive. It is unclear whether confounding factors such as regular participation, frequency of visits to the website, commitment to the community that may have developed, sources of support for the students, and other affective factors may have influenced how this community functioned (Conrad, 2005). While Lapadat (2007) reviews factors that get in the way of community formation earlier in her literature review, she does not address them in her results. It is possible that they were not applicable in her research setting. Lapadat (2007) explains that a few of the learners in this class had known each other from face-to-face classes while others had not, but does not explain how this may have impacted the results of the study. Surely this would have been a confounding factor. Conrad (2005) explains that learners that have met in person report a much stronger satisfaction for the design of an online learning program and that being connected face-to-face influences the dynamics of an online course. Were the discourse devices were central to building community as Lapadat believes? And if they were central, do the devices discussed contribute just as strongly to building community in the majority of online learning environments where learners have never met? It is unlikely that the answer is a self-assured yes, and this affects generalizability of the research. The discourse devices that Lapadat (2007)

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discusses do fit into the communication-based communal scaffolding that Conrad describes. Communal scaffolding bridges the gap between the cognitive/intellectual and social/affective/interpersonal requirements of online learning (Conrad, 2005). Also, it is very likely that Lapadat's later observations regarding discourse devices for increasing coherence and negotiating agreement, because they study the structure of online writing, are solid and generalizable to a majority of online learning environments.

Many variables contribute to the development and maintenance of online learning community. Lapadat (2007) has chosen to limit her observations to a narrow range but this does not mean other factors may not have contributed. Although she does good work in describing discursive devices with a list that appears complete and makes sense, other factors that result in enhancing or holding back community should be have been acknowledged. For example, emerging social leaders may play a role in building community (Conrad, 2005) and it may not necessarily be the discourse devices used by learners that had an equal and undeniable influence on community building; some learners may have had more influence than others. There is greater learner comfort in small, well-managed groups than in larger, open discussions (2005). To what extent did Lapadat's research setting and the small size of the class influence the degree and ease by which community was established and maintained? There are other variables. Good instructors who are respectful, knowledgeable, and prompt are better than instructors who are not, for building community (2005).

Lapadat (2007) codes her own contributions in online discussions with the same weight as that of learners, which may not be a realistic way to view the role of a teacher. Anderson (2001) describes teaching presence influences design and organization of the online course, facilitating discourse, and sharing subject matter experience with learners. Lapadat (2007)

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focuses on learner strategies and does not acknowledge the role of the teacher, and this is a limitation in her research. That said, social presence is important with learners as well and Lapadat does explore this in great detail. Shih (2005) explains that explicit training for students in the importance of social presence, ways of presenting themselves online and the nature of online discussion might help some learners adapt to the online learning medium. Much of Lapadat's (2007) research has overlap and relevance with regard to social presence that learners exhibit. It is studying the same issue from a different angle and this can only add to the overall knowledge on this topic.

The second part of Lapadat's (2007) thesis is a discussion of students' use of devices that promote coherence between their current message and their past or future online messages in the online course. She identifies three types of devices that promote this coherence: (a) backward reference which includes acknowledging another student's remark, quotations, self-reference, and answering questions; (b) contextualizing remarks and marking digressions; and (c) posing questions to progress the conversation. She notes that providing background information and structuring a message so that it referred to a wider context allowed learners to make sense of the message and realize its point. Lapadat (2007) then hones in on the purpose of coherence devices by explaining that many of them are drawn up from written conventions for argumentation rather than oral ones and that claims of written discussions being incoherent simply because of their differences to oral discussion need to be re-evaluated. It is an irrelevant comparison that is based on old thinking that oral communication in the classroom is always the best form of learner communication. Lapadat makes a strong statement and contributes to pushing the field of research on CMC and online education forward. This particular idea has potential to contribute to our understanding of online education dynamics and deserves further study.

While Lapadat's observations of discourse devices and their roles for increasing coherence make sense, she does not explain how they relate to and fit into the larger field of online learning. These discourse devices could be used in a variety of CMC settings and her analysis of their use may not necessarily inform learning specifically. Also, there are other ways to have successful threaded discussion in an online class besides what Lapadat describes. Wade, Bentley, & Waters provide guidelines for successful threaded discussion including set-up, participation, creating questions, moderating discussions, and evaluation of participation. They recognize the necessity of creating groups big enough to have critical mass for discussion but not so large to preclude meaningful discussion (Wade et al., n.d.). Guidelines should be set for what constitutes a meaningful post, and that one page (no scrolling) should be the limit for the length of a post (Wade et al., n.d.). Effective moderation is important, for without it the discussion may deteriorate into an unfocused and shallow discussion that wastes time and causes decreased motivation (Wade et al., n.d.). Instructors should encourage posts that are less formal than written papers but more formal than verbal conversations and real-time discussions (Wade et al., n.d.). Similar to the variety of ways that exist for establishing community, we see additional methods besides Lapadat's for increasing coherence. This is good, and it would be unreasonable to expect Lapadat to cover everything in her article. Some of these other variables and methods could have existed in Lapadat's class and may have been contributing factors. Lapadat does not acknowledge them therefore a reader not previously aware would not know about them from reading her article.

Lapadat (2007) then discusses the third area of her thesis: discourse devices used to negotiate points of view by agreement or disagreement. Online learning thrives with the civil discourse between learners focused on the idea of uncovering the truth, and making connections

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between pieces of knowledge that foster deep learning. Constructivism is at its core based on not taking any idea at face value without discussion and disagreement that may be necessary to analyze its value and relevance. Lapadat (2007) states that in her research agreements or disagreements were never absolute, but rather addressed specific parts of a particular message, allowing learners to share their beliefs and come to a conclusion. She explains that students had to “negotiate the challenge of acknowledging and responding to perspectives counter to their own, while maintaining the sense of community and support that had emerged among this group” (p. 76). She summarizes that “through their patterns of agreement and disagreement, participants engaged in... establishing individual identity and points of view, while also demonstrating affiliation with the online community and cultivating a sense of inclusion” (p. 77).

Lapadat (2007) makes good points regarding the nature of deep learning and the contributions of written discourse devices towards that goal. That said, one can not help but think of the invisible online student. Beaudoin (2003) explains that further research about the invisible learner is critical to better understanding the dynamics of asynchronous learning and teaching. There are factors we do not see in an online asynchronous environment that contribute to participants’ learning. Beaudoin (2003) reminds us that the actual learning remains an inherently auto-didactic and invisible process, just as it is in courses at fixed times and places. Three-fourths of learners preferred to read what others wrote, or had thoughts but others made similar comments before they could write comments in an online learning environment. Forty percent of the group that Beaudoin (2003) studied had thoughts in mind but were not quite sure how to phrase them. Nineteen of twenty-four learners felt they were learning just as much or more by reading the writing of others as their own contributions, while half of learners said they were autonomous learners less inclined to be active in a group (2003). Is it possible that the

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autonomous learner is more reflective and does not require back and forth with others in the class in order to learn? Beaudoin thinks so and this is of course certainly possible as there are students in face-to-face classes that listen rather than speak and do quite well.

While not strictly related to agreement and disagreement, Moisey (2008) conducted a study on CMC's role in community building and found that the only CMC-related activity that significantly correlated with learners' sense of community was the comparatively passive activity of reading postings. The other more active aspects were not correlated to community building. The flip side of the coin, and in line with Lapadat's view, is Gunawardena (2006) who explains that interaction is essential for participation in communities that generate knowledge and is rapidly becoming a routine expectation for learners in online learning communities. The point is that Lapadat narrowly studies the role of discourse devices and negotiating agreement. The bigger, more important, areas of focus are the factors that aid learning. If there are learners that learn better or just as well by not participating in discourse, then the question of discourse devices becomes irrelevant. It may be unfair to designate this as a weakness in Lapadat's research because discourse devices are the particular topic she has chosen to study. That said, just as with other ideas that affect community building, threaded discussions, and negotiation of meaning, it would have been useful for Lapadat to have acknowledged them in her conclusion.

Judith Lapadat has conducted a strong research study that explores an important and familiar area, that of online community building and online learning, from a different perspective. Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, & Dunlap (2004) supported the relevance of this topic by explaining that learning communities are complex systems where control is distributed among participants rather than centered. Learning communities provide an environment where students feel more connected to each other and the material; as well as set a

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social context for that learning material where learners can help each other and would be more willing to take on complicated problems (2004). Safe and supporting conditions, collaboration, progressive discourse towards knowledge building, and mutual appropriation are all areas that Wilson et al. (2004) mention and Lapadat (2007) covers in her research study. There are areas that Wilson et al. (2004) cover which Lapadat does not: shared goals and community identity. This is partially due to the more specialized topic that Lapadat chooses to study; as well as the fact that her study setting is a small class, where non-participation by a student would have been noticed and more likely to be taboo. It is also possible that the learners in the class had similar goals and community identity was not particularly important. Lapadat (2007) concludes, “it is important for the instructor to require respectful interaction and to model it, as well as to model community building devices, coherence strategies, negotiation, and higher level thinking”, that “participation in discussion must be a course requirement” , and that “interrelationships between online discourse and aspects such as gender, social climate, instructor presence, and instructional design elements of the learning environment also warrant investigation” (p. 79).

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