Chapter V

Creating Community in the Technical Communication Classroom

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Abstract

A listserv can help to create a sense of community in a technical communication classroom. After reviewing relevant literature from Composition Studies, the author introduces the Psychological Sense of Community concept, which provides a research tool to direct a quantitative evaluation of the sense of community in four technical communication classes, two that use a listserv and two that do not. The author concludes that technical communication students would benefit from learning to become members of this type of discourse community because of its relevance to the working world.
Introduction

Traditionally, an Introduction to Technical Communication class drew students from engineering and scientific disciplines. As a result, students were more likely to enter the class with a better sense of community because there were more names and faces they recognized. However, as writing skills increase in value in the workplace, the technical communication classroom becomes more disciplinarily diverse, as students from education, the social sciences, and business are attracted to and often required to take the class. To foster a positive classroom atmosphere, it becomes more necessary to create a sense of community. This chapter will focus on the use of a listserv to create community in the classroom. First, relevant literature related to the composition community will be reviewed. Then, the concept of Psychological Sense of Community (PSC) as it is currently being studied in psychology will be examined. Next, the Sense of Community Index (SCI) will be applied to four classes, two that are using a listserv and two that are not using a listserv, to determine if the SCI supports the listserv as a way of increasing the sense of community in the classroom.

The Listserv in Composition Studies

The literature pertaining to listservs in technical communication classes is scant, so we must turn to the broader field of composition studies to find more discussion. Even in composition studies, however, there seems to be more focus on synchronous rather than on asynchronous communication in the classroom. Synchronous communication, which can take the shape of a chat room, MUD, MOO, or Instant Messaging, is more glamorous, perhaps even dangerous, and therefore exciting, since in this environment we read of virtual rape and banishment, middle-aged males masquerading as teenaged females, and virtual relationships turning into real-time ones that sometimes lead to face-to-face marriage. The listserv is an email medium that on the surface seems much more mundane, about as exciting as the office memo it is replacing. That in itself may be reason enough for the lack of apparent interest: since the listserv is, basically, a form of email, it is becoming as transparent as the telephone in our existence. Such transparency should not stand between it and scholarly discussion in technical communication, however, since the conventions of effective memo writing are a part of most technical writing textbooks, and some of these texts even advise students on effective telephone use. Furthermore, a variety of listservs provide people in professional fields with access to other professionals who can aid in problem solving or simply provide moral support.
Diffusion of a Professional Social Network: Business School Graduates in Focus
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