

Parts of the Puzzle

Paper Reviewed: The Process Of Community-Building In Distance Learning Classes

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I explore the effectiveness of the research methods and methodology of Dr. Ruth E. Brown's "The Process Of Community-Building In Distance Learning Classes" (2001). Using grounded theory, Brown (2001) attempts to understand the process of community building in the online class. Through a thorough exploration of the paper, I discover three key thematic areas in which to evaluate Brown's research: transparency, data collection, and implications. These three areas reveal both the power and shortcomings of grounded theory. In the end, I discovered that grounded theory is one part of a more complex puzzle of the collective research community.

Author Keywords

Grounded theory, online learning, community building, data collection, transparency, implications.

INTRODUCTION

In "The Process Of Community-Building In Distance Learning Classes," Dr. Ruth E. Brown (2001) explores how communities are built within distance learning classes. Due to the nature of distance learning, it is natural for students to feel disconnected from the community of students and instructors learning and teaching along with them. Having taught online courses for over six years, I have an intimate familiarity with the challenges of keeping online learners engaged. Since distance learning primarily occurs independently, a sense of connection is critical to keep students motivated and on track. Dr. Brown's (2001) research has profound implications for helping to develop the kind of community that will keep online learners engaged, thereby increasing their motivation to learn. And in order to build online learning communities, human-centered engineers and designers must have an understanding of how those connections form. In this paper, I will analyze how Brown's (2001) transparency, data collection, and implications offer a profound groundwork for future research.



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SUMMARY

Dr. Brown's (2001) aim is to "develop a theory about the process through which community formed in adult computer-mediated asynchronous distance learning classes" (p. 18). To do this, she uses grounded theory, gathering qualitative data through "archived class input" and interviews with 21 students and three faculty from three different online courses (Brown 2001, p. 18). The goal of grounded theory is "building theory" rather than testing it (Pace, 2004, p. 332). The idea is that rather than begin with a theory, the research allows the theory to "emerge from the data" (Pace, 2004, p. 332).

Analyzing the data, Brown (2001) arrives at a "three-stage phenomenon," shown in **Table 1** below, that involves increasing levels of engagement with "both the class and the dialogue" (p. 18). She identifies conditions under which these layers of community were created, strategies to help encourage the creation of community, and consequences of increased community engagement.

Stage	Description
1	Friendly Communicating
2	Acceptance
3	Camaraderie

Table 1 – Three Levels of Community

From this analysis, Brown (2001) arrived at a visual model to represent the process of community creation within online courses, noting benefits to and suggestions for forming an online community.

EVALUATION

To evaluate this paper, I used the UBASE Framework, developed by Jennifer Turns, Professor at the University of Washington, and taught during lectures on Empirical Traditions in the department of Human Centered Design and Engineering (Divine, 2014). UBASE is a scaffolding technique that guides research reviews across themes of understandability, believability, applicability, significance, and ethics. I began by identifying two to three characteristics of each element within Brown's (2001) paper. I then placed each on a sheet of paper and conducted a card sort that revealed the three categories seen in **Image 1**: transparency, readability, and content.

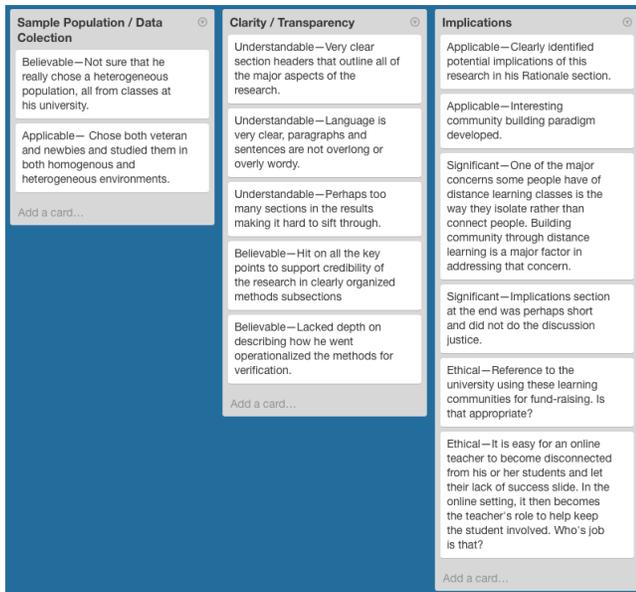


Image 1 – Digital card sort results using Trello

Transparency

Brown’s (2001) methodical approach to laying out all aspects of her research leaves her process transparent to the reader. Transparency is critical to what Shavelson (2002) considers the “chain of reasoning” which he argues “must be **coherent, explicit** ... and **persuasive** to a skeptical reader” (p. 67). Brown addresses this need through her organization, readability, and content.

Organization

Brown’s (2001) organization ensures a **coherent** chain of reasoning which bolsters the understandability of her work. Clear and obvious section titles outline all aspects of the research process. Headers such as “Research Questions,” “Research Design,” and “Data Collection Procedures” give the reader a clear pathway through her method and anticipates reader questions. Booth (2003) explains that “readers are likely to question *any* part of your argument” and therefore a good researcher anticipates “as many of their questions as you can” and respond to “the most important ones” (p. 118).

Although largely a strength, her headings may also be a detriment when we reach her results where she has seven second-level headers and fifteen third-level headers. The number of headers here may make it hard to see the forest for the trees. However, even within all those headers, Brown (2001) organizes each claim well, supporting her claims with findings from her research. As Booth (2003) explains, to make a good argument, you need “organization that comes not from the categories of your data but from the logic of your answer and its support” (p. 111).

Readability

Brown (2001) also uses simple and concise language to ensure her chain of reasoning is **explicit** and credible. Credibility is central to the believability of qualitative research (Divine, 2014). Nothing is hidden in overly

complex or difficult language. I ran all the textual content from Brown’s (2001) paper through a writing sample analyzer developed by Sarah K. Tyler. After removing headers, charts, and the list of references, the analysis revealed the results seen in **Table 2**.

Attribute	Measurement
Number of Sentences	345
Words Per Sentence	19.05
Characters Per Word	5.43
Flesch Reading Ease	51.32
Fog Scale Level	14.62
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	10.83

Table 2 – Writing sample analysis results

The Flesch Reading Ease Scale uses “syllables and sentence length to determine the reading ease” of a document: the lower the number, the more challenging the reading (Tyler, 2014). “Plain English” comes in at a score of 60, 50 to 60 is considered a 10th–12th grade reading level, insurance documents are required to be in the 40 to 50 range in most states, and below 30 is graduate level. As you can see from the Flesch score and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade level, this paper is written at a high school level making it highly accessible. For comparison, the Fog Scale—which measures the number of words containing three or more syllables—states “5 is readable, 10 is hard, 15 is difficult, and 20 is very difficult,” giving a perhaps more critical assessment of the readability (Tyler, 2014).

But just as research is not all about quantitative data, readability is not all about numbers. Law (2004) suggests that attention to words, language, and crafting a paper should not be limited to fictional work. Brown’s (2001) paper has a general sense of accessibility. Her paper tells an engaging story that carries the reader along. Both a classmate and I found her logic easy to follow and information easy to locate. Research papers “must reflect not only the structure of your argument, but also the structure of your readers’ understanding” (Booth, 2003 pp. 111–112).

Content

Brown (2001) provides a **persuasive** chain of reasoning to even the skeptical reader through her thorough documentation of her process, providing for transferability of her research. In qualitative research, transferability is the key to supporting applicability (Divine, 2014). Brown (2001) includes the interview questions within the methods section of her paper so that readers know exactly how she is getting information from her subjects (p. 19). Although often not included in research papers due to space restrictions, including the questions makes it possible for

other researchers to replicate Brown's interviews, a strategy that strengthens the transferability of this research to another setting (Shavelson, 2002, p. 70).

Shenton (2004) explains that qualitative research "must be understood within the context of the particular characteristics of the organisation or organisations and, perhaps, geographical area in which the fieldwork was carried out" (p. 70). Through a clear documentation of context, research can be appropriately transferred to other scenarios, allowing for multiple studies to build a coherent picture of the reality around us. Brown (2001) addresses key questions that a reader might have about her research process. She defines subjective terms like "community," "community-building," and "distance learners" (p. 20). She describes both her qualitative paradigm as well as her grounded theory methodology. She addresses site selection, participant recruitment and background, collected data types, data analysis, and data verification. All of this provides a strong context for her research.

Additionally, Brown (2001) is transparent in her results. Rather than writing off users who did not feel a sense of community in their online courses, Brown (2001) addresses why participants felt no sense of community (pp. 25–26). Booth (2003) explains that qualifying our claims strengthens our credibility (p. 135). Rather than try to gloss over users that felt no sense of community, Brown (2001) is open about identifying and addressing those reasons, strengthening not only her credibility but also bolstering the transferability of her research by exploring both how to build community and what circumstances might hinder it.

Data Collection

Brown (2001) gives a clear explanation of how she selected participants, collected data from them, and analyzed that data. Shenton (2004) explains that thorough documentation of "data collection methods" is critical to the transferability of qualitative research. Brown (2001) effectively chooses both veteran and newbie online learners and studied them both together and separately. Thanks to her thorough documentation of the process, this study can be applied to other future research.

In her argument, Brown (2001) explains her process of testing first homogenous populations and then heterogeneous populations (p. 21). Her homogenous populations are well documented: similar experience-level students all from the same class. Her heterogeneous population is perhaps questionable. Although she did mix both experienced and new online learners, she still pulled all the students from the same summer school class and fails to justify how those students are heterogeneous beyond have different levels of experience with online learning.

She also lacks depth in her verification methods. Brown (2001) named the strategies used: "long-term observation at the research site, triangulation of multiple data sources, member checks, peer review, and rich, thick description"

but failed to articulate how she operationalized each of those methods. (p. 22). It is important to note that triangulation and "development of an early familiarity with the culture of participating organizations" is critical for credibility in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004, p. 65). However, a lack of detail about how triangulation was accomplished and what early site visits revealed leaves many questions in the reader's mind.

This parallels Shenton's (2004) questioning of whether it is possible to produce "truly transferable results from a single study" (p. 71). This question interestingly foreshadows Law's (2004) claim that "the world is so rich that our theories about it will always fail to catch more than a part of it" (p. 8). Standing alone, a single study is doomed to catch only glimpses of reality. Rather, studies are but pieces in a grander puzzle.

Implications

The implications of this research speak strongly to the applicability, significance, and ethics of this topic. While Brown does a very thorough job in setting up the relevance of her research, there is a certain anti-climactic end to her concluding implications.

Brown (2001) establishes applicability early in her paper. Her second section explains the reasoning behind this research, noting that very few studies have explored "how adult distance learning students define community" (p. 19). Her research is significant because it provides background for curriculum developers in understanding how to build community in their online learning environments. Having been an online teacher myself, I recognize the challenge that comes with creating that environment.

Building community has implications in student motivation, school retention and pass rates, networking opportunities, and a sense of belonging and lifelong affiliation with a student's university (Brown, 2001, p. 19). Building a paradigm to help create this kind of community gives teachers and curriculum developers a language and theory with which to approach a very amorphous target. One of the major concerns some people have of distance learning classes is the way they isolate rather than connect people. Building community through distance learning is a significant factor in addressing that concern.

Despite establishing a strong start to identifying the significance of this research, the concluding implications section feels incomplete. A significant amount of space is dedicated to the insights section, helping to solidify and understand the results. The results section provides a thorough understanding of the community building process. However, the final implications section is a short two paragraphs.

Brown (2001) fails to address potential ethical implications of this research. One big ethical dilemma among online teachers is the balance between seeking out students who have fallen out of activity, and taking on the responsibility

of bringing students into the fold. What degree of responsibility does the teacher have to engage students and bring them into online activities and discussion? This is something that likely will change depending on the age of students as well.

Additionally, Brown (2001) raises the possibility of universities using these learning communities for fundraising yet fails to address the ethical implications of that.

This brevity perhaps speaks to the strengths and weaknesses of Brown's (2001) method: grounded theory. Grounded theory is designed to help create new theory that can then be tested by further research. Brown's (2001) results, clearly outline a theory for how community is built in online learning classes, but the true implications need be explored with further research and tested with other methods.

CONCLUSIONS

Brown's (2001) transparency, data collection, and implications reveal both the power and the shortcomings of grounded theory.

Through her organized, coherent, and thorough message, Brown reveals the strength of grounded theory as a foundation for new ideas. By so clearly laying out her research, she empowers future researchers to apply her methods and test her findings. By clearly outlining the implications of this topic, she makes clear the significance of her work.

However, the ethics of her research are not as thoroughly explored and—although the significance is clear—her model still requires testing from other research methods to prove it's credibility.

Grounded theory is one method that has a distinct place and purpose in the world of research. Recognizing its strengths and weaknesses help us to place it in the bigger puzzle of research. We must recognize that knowledge does not rest on a single study, but how each study contributes to the greater community. As Law (2004) explains, though "novels are ends in themselves... academic writings are a means to other ends" (p. 11).

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