

**A Critique of an Ethnographic Approach to the Study of an Online Health Support  
Community: Advantages, Disadvantages, and Lessons Learned**

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The purpose of this paper is to critique the use of an ethnographic research approach in a study of an online health support community. The study was conducted in fulfillment of the requirements for a Ph. D. in Language, Literacy, and Culture, an interdisciplinary program at the University of Maryland Baltimore County (UMBC). The purpose of the study was to gain a deep understanding of the meaning that belonging to an online health community has for its members, of the relationships within the community, and of the role the online community plays in the offline lives of its members.

Ethnographic research, broadly defined, is becoming an increasingly popular method for studying the Internet because of the unique way it can be used “to develop an enriched sense of the meanings of the technology and the cultures which enable it and are enabled by it” (Hine, 2000, p. 8). Baym (2000) used an ethnographic approach, grounded in a set of theories termed the practice approach, to study an online soap opera fan group. This approach is based on the work of Lave & Wenger (1991) that contends that in order to understand a community, one must look at the activities in which the community members engage. This approach emphasizes language activities as a community-instantiating force. Language practices are a “microcosm of the communities in which they are used” (p. 22). The focus on language practice is particularly well suited to the study of online communities because in the online environment, language takes the place of geography, institutions, and artifacts that are found in offline communities (Baym, 2000, p. 23; Hine, 2000). In an online community, emoticons, in-jokes, and local codes and abbreviations help build a sense of community and shared practices, knowledge, and language (Kollock & Smith, 1999; Baym, 1997; Fernback, 1999; Kollock, 1999).

In this paper, we will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using an ethnographic research approach in this particular study of an online health support community. The critique includes a discussion of what worked well, what did not work, and lessons learned.

### **The Study**

The ethnographic study involved 2 and \_ years of observation of a successful and very active online health support community (Bob's ACL WWWBoard). Ethnography requires a long-term immersion in the community being studied and this immersion may be as a participant observer or as an observer. The researcher in this study was an observer of the community and did not participate in the community because that would have required faking an injury, which is unethical and may have tainted the findings of the study.

The Internet home of this online community was viewed as a cultural artifact and described, in the study, in detail. An analysis of the site was conducted using sociability and usability guidelines from the field of human-computer interaction. Messages posted for a one-week period in November 2001 (494 messages) were coded using group membership roles analysis (Benne & Sheats, 1948), Interaction Process Analysis (Bales, 1951, 1958) and Social Network analysis (Wellman & Frank, 2001). In addition, 20 community members were interviewed online.

### **Advantages**

One of the major advantages of using an ethnographic research approach ( which, in this study was mainly observational) was that it provided a theoretical framework for the study which helped contextualize the data in each phase of the research (Walcott, 1999). It is easy to lose ones way in a long-term study of a community because of the sheer volume of data that piles up day by day (Fetterman, 1998). The ethnographic approach kept the study focused on understanding the culture of the online community from an emic (insider's) point of view. While analyzing the messages using group membership roles, interaction process and social network analysis, we kept the concepts of triangulation and confirmability of data in mind as we studied each set of data. The online interviews conducted with members in the final phase of the study were guided by the research principle of cross checking the data gathered in each phase of the study (observations, message analysis, and examination of the Web site). The holistic nature of

the ethnographic approach, in which findings are contextualized, was invaluable as we began to synthesize the findings from each type of analysis in order to present the findings and conclusions, describe the culture of the Kneeboard, and to tell the story of the community from the point of view of its members.

### **What Worked Well**

The ethnographic research approach was valuable because it provided a flexible set of methods that allowed for feedback, course corrections and discovery (Walcott, 1999). One initial research goal was eventually eliminated and the study was redesigned to include a chapter describing the Internet home of the community as a cultural artifact.

An example of the synergy that is afforded by an ethnographic approach is the way that one of the key findings emerged from the process. Through the study, the researcher logged on to the community four or five times a week and read the messages members posted. It became apparent that the community had a very narrow focus on a particular type of knee injury, that the messages rarely strayed off topic, that there was very little aggressive or hostile behavior exhibited, and that members commonly expressed empathy and support towards one another. An examination of the Internet home of the community as a cultural artifact, revealed that the message index dominated the site; all other pages (e.g. a reference library, member profile page, photo album) were secondary to the message index. The sociability analysis revealed that the community had no formal statements of purpose, policies, and description of roles; all things that online community designers and developers feel are very important for the success of a community (Preece, 2000). Group membership roles revealed that the dominant roles played by members included information giver, information seeker, and encourager. The primary forms of interaction between members were giving information, giving opinions, seeking information and showing solidarity. Drawing these findings together and reflecting on what they meant to the members of the community, we came to understand that the culture of the community and norms of behavior were expressed through the message index in an organic way. Interviews with community members, confirmed that members believed that the message index reflects the purpose of the community and the acceptable forms of behavior and attitudes in the community. The message index is the place where these beliefs are expressed and enforced by the

community. During the course of the study, we observed many exchanges in which members expressed the values of the group and asked others to conform to them. For instance, the community valued a positive proactive attitude towards knee injury. Several times, we observed members admonishing other members to stop whining about their knee problems, take charge, and get on with their lives. The key finding that emerged from this data is: Strong group norms of support and reciprocity made externally-driven governance unnecessary. Support of sociability did not have to be explicitly stated, because the purpose, governance structures, and norms of the community were embedded and expressed in the communication between community members. We believe that the ethnographic research approach helped answer the research questions in a rich and meaningful way that would not have been possible with a more rigid research approach.

### **Disadvantages**

Traditional ethnographic research requires a long-term time commitment and intense personal involvement with the community being studied. This approach is not always possible or practical for many adult students who wish to use this approach to develop a deep understanding of the culture and life of a particular community. However, by using a multi-level ethnographic approach that included research tools from other disciplines, we were able to develop a thick and rich description of Bob's ACL WWWBoard. Even though, we adapted ethnographic research methods and only observed the community (did not participate in it), the study required 2 \_ years to complete. It took a great amount of time to analyze and understanding all the data collected. It was necessary to review, discuss, and synthesize the data in order to flesh out its meaning. The ethnographic approach requires time for reflection and cross checking of data. It requires that the researchers carefully seek the meaning that the members of the community assign to the experience of belonging to the community. This process cannot be rushed or hurried.

### **Lessons Learned**

Reflecting upon the study, we believe that it could have been strengthened by the following: 1) Coding of messages for a longer period of time or for several one week periods over the course of the study would have provided even deeper insight into the dynamics of interaction in the community; 2) Face-to-face interviews with at least one focus group with members of the online

community would have been a valuable addition to the study. Online interviews were the most effective and efficient way to communicate because the online community was composed of people from all around the world. However, one of the features of online communicating is that people are able to tightly manage presentation of self (Goffman, 1959), something which cannot be done as easily in face-to-face situations.

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