Examining the Pedagogic Discourse of an Online Fan Space: A Focus on Flexible Roles

Jayne C. Lammers

University of Rochester

Abstract

Research demonstrates rich opportunities available to young writers who share their work online, yet technology use in writing classrooms remains largely teacher-centered, disconnected from Internet audiences, and focused on editing and revising final products with word processing tools (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Graham, Capizzi, Harris, Hebert, & Morphy, 2014). The purpose of this article is to examine the pedagogy at work within an online community, The Sims Writers’ Hangout, in order to inform classroom-based writing instruction. Using Bernstein’s (1990; 2000; 2004) pedagogic discourse theory as a lens, interview and artifactual data collected during a two-year affinity space ethnography were analyzed to make visible how, unlike in many formal educational sites, The Sims Writers’ Hangout allowed for flexibility in terms of who could be a transmitter of knowledge in this online community. Implications for English classrooms are shared.

Keywords: digital literacy; online community; pedagogy; technology; writing
Introduction

Spending time around adolescents, in schools or out, one cannot help noticing how connected they are via smartphones and other technologies. America’s young people report going online at staggering rates — 92% of 13- to 17-year-olds go online daily, with 24% claiming to use the Internet “almost constantly” (Lenhart, 2015). They use technology to look up information, satisfy personal curiosities, or work on school assignments. They connect to friends via social media. And, of particular interest to writing teachers, 38% of teens report sharing original creative work online (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010).

Literacy researchers have long argued for the importance of studying the practices and implications of adolescents’ engagement with digital technology (e.g. Alvermann, 2008; Leu, O’Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009). From research documenting youth writing in online spaces, we know how sharing their writing online connects youth to passionate audiences who shape their work (Black, 2008; Curwood, Magnifico, & Lammers, 2013; Lammers & Marsh, 2015) and about the kind of feedback writers receive in online reviews (Magnifico, Curwood, & Lammers, 2015; Padgett & Curwood, 2016). Unfortunately, though research demonstrates rich opportunities available to writers who share their work online, technology use in writing classrooms remains largely teacher-centered, disconnected from broader Internet audiences, and focused on editing and revising final products with word processing tools (Applebee & Langer, 2011; Graham et al., 2014). This disconnect between what youth writers experience in online writing communities and what they experience in classrooms persists despite the fact that the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) — standards which govern the writing curriculum throughout much of the Mid-Atlantic region — have an emphasis on using technology to “interact and collaborate with others” (NGA Center & CCSSO, 2010).

Some researchers argue that schools are not keeping up with the learning opportunities afforded by online communities (Alvermann, 2011; Gee, 2013), and make impassioned pleas for “starting over” in public education (Larson, 2014). I believe it is possible to address this disconnect from a different perspective. As a former English teacher and a university researcher currently responsible for preparing English teachers, I look for bridges and connections between online spaces and literacy classrooms.

My research explores one online fan community, The Sims Writers’ Hangout (SWH), to seek such connections. Briefly, SWH provides an online forum for fans of The Sims videogames to share their Sims fanfiction writing. Using this life-simulation videogame, participants create stories that combine photos taken from their game with narratives they write, which they then post online for feedback. This article aims to better understand the nature of pedagogy within this site. My particular interest in examining the pedagogy of SWH stems from recognition that while others have made claims about the learning happening in online spaces (e.g. Gee, 2004), less is known about how teaching happens in online communities like SWH (Lammers, 2013). This article addresses that gap in our knowledge for the purpose of informing writing classrooms.
Theorizing Pedagogy

Though many have drawn on apprenticeship models (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991) and other theories of informal learning to make sense of learning and participation in online fan communities, I sought a pedagogical theory with roots in formal educational contexts to explore how pedagogy within SWH might relate to teaching practices in writing classrooms. I therefore turned to Bernstein’s (1990; 2000; 2004) pedagogic discourse, which has been used to make sense of a variety of instructional interactions, and the policies and curricular materials that shape them (e.g. Marsh, 2007; Williams, 1999). Bernstein (2000) studied the sociological nature of pedagogy and how official and local knowledge are constructed and taught, looking for “general principles underlying the transformation of knowledge into pedagogic communication” (p. 25). He posited that there was a grammar – or set of rules – that governed what knowledge is and is not included and how that knowledge gets communicated, regardless of subject matter or context. To address our gap in understanding teaching in online fan communities, I brought Bernstein’s rules to bear on pedagogic interactions I observed in SWH.

For this purpose, I drew on Bernstein’s concept of the pedagogic device, which he articulated as a set of interrelated, hierarchical rules: distributive, re-contextualizing, and evaluative rules. Briefly, distributive rules “mark and distribute who may transmit what to whom and under what conditions, and they attempt to set the outer limits of legitimate discourse” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 31). Within these limits, re-contextualizing rules constitute specific pedagogic discourses that move knowledge from its original site (e.g., the journalism field) into a pedagogic site (e.g., journalism class) creating the subject matter that gets taught. Finally, evaluative rules, “define the standards which must be reached” (Bernstein, 2000, p. 115), thus setting criteria for what gets learned.

Two ideas derived from Bernstein’s rules became particularly important to my understanding of pedagogy in SWH: 1) regulative discourse and 2) the relationship between teachers and students. According to Bernstein (2000), pedagogic discourse is comprised of instructional discourse, or the specialized skills of a subject and their relationship to each other, which is embedded within regulative discourse, or what creates the rules of social order and values. He explained this embedded relationship by arguing that, in education, the emphasis on reproducing values and a society’s structure, or order, means that regulative discourse dominates instructional discourse in pedagogic interactions. My analysis takes up Bernstein’s notion of regulative discourse to explore who had the power to influence such order in SWH.

Also related to power in pedagogic interactions, Bernstein (2004) described the pedagogic relationship between the teachers he called “transmitters” and the students he referred to as “acquirers” as a hierarchical relationship. Though many, myself included, recognize that even in the most traditional classrooms, teachers also learn and students do much more than acquire content and values, Bernstein distilled the complexity of education down to this essential relationship to uncover general principles of pedagogy and reveal its role in social reproduction. In analyzing pedagogic communication in SWH, I looked not only for ways this online fan community exemplified Bernstein’s theory, but also how it differed, seeking implications for today’s writing classrooms.
Study Design

This analysis draws on data gathered during a two-year affinity space ethnography (Lammers, Curwood, & Magnifico, 2012). As theorized by Gee (2004), affinity spaces are informal learning spaces wherein participants gather to pursue a “common endeavor” (p. 85). In SWH, participants had an affinity for playing The Sims videogames in general, and reading, creating, and sharing Sims fanfiction in particular. To understand pedagogy in SWH, how it compared to the formal educational contexts theorized by Bernstein, and the possible implications for writing classrooms, the analysis presented in this article focuses on answering this research question: How are transmitter and acquirer roles enacted in SWH?

Research Context

SWH is an online discussion forum started and maintained by a group of The Sims fans interested in the story-writing practices associated with the videogame. By the time of my study, SWH had grown to over 12,000 members who had posted more than 665,000 messages on over 31,000 topics organized into 22 forums and 72 sub-forums (May, 12, 2010). SWH included sub-forums for sharing story ideas, posting requests for proofreading assistance, linking to other websites where creators could download custom content for their game, and sharing tips and writing advice that included various member-created tutorials. Though SWH was not a repository for uploading Sims fanfiction itself, some of the most active Sims-related forums allowed authors to create threads for particular stories wherein they shared links to new chapters or complete stories (hosted on their own websites or blogs, for example) and readers responded with reactions, feedback, criticism, and encouragement. Much of the data used in this analysis come from Sims story threads.

Though SWH did not publish precise member demographic information, by reviewing profiles, I determined that most members self-reported as females in their teens or early twenties. Members’ profiles indicated that most lived in the USA, Australia, Canada, and Western Europe. Consistent with practices in other online communities, a small group of SWH members contributed the majority of the posts, and nearly 9000 SWH members had never posted even one message (Lammers, 2012). A few designated members also held formal leadership positions, serving as moderators, or transmitters of SWH pedagogy; moderators created posts that dictated participation norms in the forums, monitored discussion board threads to insure the content was appropriate, and developed and managed various writing activities and contests in SWH.

Data Collection and Analysis

To begin the affinity space ethnographic process, I spent extended time conducting systematic observations of SWH. I studied the forums, working to understand not only the distinct content within each, but also to recognize patterns of participation across the site. In particular, I noted the various ways members were taught how to participate in SWH by examining moderators’ interactions, collecting all of the rules posted throughout the forums, observing contests, and reading the feedback authors received. I also identified potential study participants who might be able to provide insiders’ perspectives on SWH.

After twelve months of systematic observation, I contacted SWH members whose activities represented a range of experiences, including moderators, longtime and newer
members, popular authors, and those who posted a great deal. This yielded eight participants for my study. I then gathered and reviewed artifacts documenting their participation on SWH. These data allowed me to customize the semi-structured virtual interviews I then conducted with each participant through email or private message on SWH. Study participants provided insights into their SWH practices through one to three interviews each and/or numerous email exchanges. Though all eight participants informed my broader understanding of SWH pedagogy (see Lammers, 2013), data highlighted in this article derive from Angela (all names are pseudonyms), a newer member of SWH, and the two moderators in my study, Pamela and Missy. The focal data are outlined in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Date Joined SWH</th>
<th>Total SWH Posts</th>
<th>SWH Status**</th>
<th>Data Collected</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Angela</td>
<td>Aug. 10, 2009</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>Full Member</td>
<td>3 Interviews, 2 follow-up emails, 280 SWH posts, 4 story threads, 5 Sims fanfictions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missy</td>
<td>Feb. 17, 2006</td>
<td>1591</td>
<td>Senior Staff</td>
<td>1 Interview, sample of SWH posts, 1 SWH story thread, 3-chapter Sims fanfiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pamela</td>
<td>May 11, 2007</td>
<td>3409</td>
<td>Senior Staff</td>
<td>4 Informal email exchanges, sample of SWH posts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes. Participants identified themselves as females. Data are as of June 1, 2010.
* Pseudonym, age, and place of residence.
** Status markers were displayed on SWH profiles, automatically changing as members posted more or assumed moderator roles.

While analyzing data, I kept in mind Gee’s (2011) concept of discourse analysis, which he describes as “the study of language at use in the world, not just to say things, but to do things” (p. ix). I analyzed my participants’ discussion forum posts to determine what members and moderators were doing through language, looking for instances of pedagogic communication. I considered a post to be pedagogic, and thus included in this analysis, if it provided any instruction related to how to participate in SWH (regulative) or how to create Sims fanfiction (instructional). Having identified these particular posts, I then turned back to Bernstein’s (1990; 2000; 2004) theory. Using pedagogic discourse as a lens through which I analyzed pedagogy in SWH made visible how, unlike in the formal educational sites that Bernstein studied, SWH allowed for flexibility in terms of who could be a transmitter of knowledge in this online community.

Flexible Roles of Transmitters and Acquirers

Bernstein’s model represented transmitter and acquirer roles as fixed (i.e. teachers transmit the knowledge and students acquire it). However, my analysis revealed that in SWH such roles are more flexible. The fluidity of these relationships is visible throughout the pedagogic discourse in SWH, particularly in regulative discourse, reader responses, and critiques posted in Sims fanfiction story threads.
Regulative Discourse

Similar to the norms found in formal classroom environments, SWH forums contained numerous posts aimed at creating social order, transmitting values, and regulating interactions; however, while SWH’s moderators transmitted much of this discourse, SWH members also regulated each other. For example, in a thread where Angela — a new member without any moderating responsibilities — shared one of her Sims fanfiction stories, a reader posted this message: “time may change me, but i [sic] can’t change time” (SWH post, August 29, 2009). This post did not respond directly to Angela’s story, as this (inaccurate) song quote had nothing to do with the storyline. In response, Angela posted, “That's not relative at all. I don't want this thread to get locked for being off-topic, so please don't post that again!” (SWH post, August 31, 2009). Angela takes on the role of transmitter; she posts regulative discourse to ensure her story thread aligns with the social order valued in SWH. Similar interactions sometimes occur in classrooms as students enforce teachers’ rules with each other.

Also relevant to this discussion of flexibility in roles is an understanding of how a member becomes a moderator in SWH. In typical school-based pedagogic interactions, transmitters must acquire the knowledge and skills of their content area before taking on the role of transmitter, as evidenced by the subject-area knowledge tests that teachers pass for certification, for example. However, in SWH, transmitters do not need to demonstrate evidence of having acquired certain knowledge or skills in creating Sims fanfiction before they assume the role of transmitter. For example, one of the focal moderator participants, Pamela, did not post Sims fanfiction in SWH either before or during her tenure as a moderator. When I asked her about how she became Senior Staff in the space, Pamela explained: “I was really the only active Hangout Helper left…because of my leadership, Jen (old staff) entrusted me with Senior Staff and took her leave” (personal communication, February 19, 2010). In other words, Pamela was given the necessary permissions to take on the responsibility of Senior Staff in part by default, but also because she demonstrated “leadership” in regulating the space; however, she had not demonstrated the knowledge and skills of a Sims fanfiction writer. While peer review practices — a staple in many writing classrooms — allow students to take up transmitter roles as they offer feedback to their classmates, such pedagogic interactions focus mainly on transmitting instructional discourse as students share writing content knowledge. Rarely do students have the power to regulate social order and transmit the values of a classroom, as Pamela had the opportunity to do as head moderator of SWH.

Reader Responses

Reader responses are a prominent form of pedagogic communication in SWH. Because of SWH’s discussion board platform, when writers post their work in a story thread, anyone, member or moderator, can post feedback on a Sims fanfiction story. Whereas in one interaction a member can be the transmitter in a reader response, that same member can, in another interaction be on the receiving end, acquiring knowledge. Angela’s participation in SWH illustrates this flexibility of roles. In the following example, Angela takes on the role of acquirer, as seen in this exchange between her and a reader of one of her Sims fanfiction stories. This reader posted:
Just one thing -- in your excerpt, there's a paragraph of description and this little bits of description. Try and get rid of the paragraph and spread it through out [sic] the action. It seems to get boring just reading about appearances. (I don't mean to sound rude, just saying.) (SWH member post, September 18, 2009)

To which Angela responded,

Yeah, I get what you mean with the description. I was writing it really fast just to get something down before I completely forgot how I wanted the prologue to go. I'll work on that. (: And thank you so much! (SWH post, September 19, 2009)

Thus, we see Angela acknowledge how she will respond to the feedback, acquiring new information about the practice of Sims fanfiction writing. Just two months later, Angela takes on the role of transmitter, in a reader response she posted on another member’s Sims fanfiction:

Ah, I hate to have to say it, but I think you got a lot of these ideas from Twilight. That's fine as long as you develop the ideas into your own story. …I'd also have to say that your writing could easily be improved simply by reading some other stories on this site, or you can get help from The Vault [an SWH sub-forum containing tutorials and writing ideas]. It wasn't too bad, but there's certainly room for improvement. If you need any help with future chapter, feel free to PM [private message]. (Angela SWH post, November 18, 2009)

Angela offers an instructional suggestion, pointing the writer to resources available in SWH, and she also offers future assistance as a transmitter. As a learning environment, SWH allows her to take up the role of transmitter in some pedagogic interactions and acquirer in others. While many writing teachers structure specific pedagogic interactions that mimic the flexibility of roles seen in SWH — as noted with peer review — it is important to note that the teacher still retains the power to design such instructional opportunities, or not. The design of online forums like SWH, however, make such flexibility of roles always available to participants, as is also evident in the next section's discussion of critiques.

**Critiques**

In addition to welcoming feedback through reader responses, SWH encouraged readers to complete more structured evaluations of Sims fanfiction stories by using one of the “critique forms” available in the forum. Critiques, as pedagogic interactions, illustrate the flexible nature of transmitter and acquirer roles in this space because they allow members to take up the role of teacher as they give specific feedback to SWH writers, who can also be moderators. Below is a critique that Missy — who was a moderator in SWH — received on a Sims fanfiction chapter she posted on SWH:

**Name of Story:** Baby Blue: Chapter 1  
**Introduction:** 8/10  
I loved the scenes and the way you started it off. I was instantly hooked.  
**Body:** 9/10  
I love this story. I kept me thinking and wanting to know more. The part where Lisa overheard the doctor really got me wondering. Hopefully you let us know in a future chapter who the doctor was talking to.
Conclusion/End of chapter 9/10
I loved the ending! Especially the ninja! That was very unique and very creative. It left me with a lot of questions and kept me wanting to read more. I also loved how you had previews for the next chapter, much like you see on tv [sic]. Very creative;
Likes: As I said before, I like the previews you had at the end of the chapter. I also loved how the nurse was talking about the Grayford’s [sic] and then Lisa's law firm is also working with them.
Dislikes: Can't think of any at the moment.
Graphics: 9/10
You have an awesome graphics card and the scenes are awesome. However, some of them could use some more props.
Grammar: 9/10
There were a few small errors I picked up on, but nothing too major.
Rating from reviewer (on the Exchange): 5/5
Rating out of ten: 9/10
Pointers for improvement: As I said, some scenes could use more props, but other than that I can't think of anything you really needed to improve on. (SWH member post, September 30, 2006)

By completing this critique form, the reader shares both quantitative and qualitative feedback with Missy. The reader makes specific references back to the text, and transmits pedagogic discourse that can shape Missy’s future writing. This example also illustrates how moderators have flexibility in their roles in SWH, as they too can share their own Sims fanfiction for feedback from readers. While there have been calls for teachers to share their own writing with students, such modeling rarely occurs in writing classrooms (Gallagher, 2011).

Conclusion

This analysis of transmitter and acquirer roles in SWH illustrates ways that online fan communities encourage flexibility in such roles, and points to implications for writing classrooms. As an online discussion forum set up for the purpose of creating stories and sharing them for audience feedback, educators might think of SWH as an online writing workshop. Numerous research studies and descriptions of practice encourage teachers to implement writing workshop models in English classrooms. These models often highlight how they disrupt the pedagogic relationship that Bernstein (2004) describes, positioning teachers as writers “beside” their students (Kittle, 2008) and inviting students to take on roles as experts (Atwell, 2015). Yet, the majority of classroom-based writing still adheres to a hierarchical relationship in which teachers serve as the sole examiner of students’ writing (Applebee & Langer, 2011). If writing were to be shared more broadly in classrooms, with teachers displaying their work for student feedback and students reviewing with each other’s writing more often, writing pedagogy may begin to bridge disconnects between how youth can learn online and in schools.

Thinking about how the pedagogic practices in SWH might inform classrooms, I am reminded of Hicks and Turner’s (2013) argument that teaching digital literacy in English classrooms is “no longer a luxury” (p. 64). My hope is that highlighting the pedagogy of SWH may allow English teachers to see greater relevance in online spaces and
to consider them worthy sites for developing young people’s digital literacy practices. While others have brought fanfiction directly into English classrooms when analyzing fanfiction as literary text (e.g., McWilliams, Hickey, Hines, Conner, & Bishop, 2011), I echo previous cautions about bringing youth literacy practices into school spaces in inauthentic ways (see Curwood, et al., 2013). Rather, I see the greatest potential in having teacher-supported explorations of online writing communities so that youth may benefit from a teacher’s guidance in navigating the expectations of writing in authentic online spaces (see Lammers & Marsh, 2015). Given the emphasis on writing with technology in the CCSS, teachers have an opportunity to connect students to passionate online audiences. I argue that we owe it to young writers to do so.

References


**Author**

JAYNE C. LAMMERS earned her Ph.D. in Curriculum and Instruction, with an emphasis in Language and Literacy, from Arizona State University. She is an Assistant Professor and Director of the secondary English teacher preparation program at University of Rochester's Warner Graduate School of Education and Human Development. Her research explores adolescent literacies in "in the wild" digital spaces, with the goal of shaping formal literacy instruction.

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