COMMUNITY REVISITED:
INVOKING THE SUBJECTIVITY OF THE ONLINE LEARNER

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ABSTRACT

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In this project, I argue that the communal potential of online education has been limited to an essentialized and inflexible notion of community that has served as a yardstick of success for education across levels and disciplines. Tracing the roots of the limited understanding and uses of online community to two themes in sociology and communication – the instinctual drive toward community-building and the egalitarian promise of online technology – I propose examining online communities in light of a fundamentally different bind – a discourse that allows divorcing the notion and practice of online community from the notion and practice of any other discourse, particularly face to face communication, and enables assessing and appreciating online community as a dynamic concept in its own right. Such approach to online community allows for a more informed idea of communicating online that resonates with the many paths of identity and literacy formation afforded by online technology.

The empirical part of the project examines the online interactions in a distance learning class, focusing on the subjectivities of its students. Using both qualitative and quantitative data, the study explores the role the online subjectivities play in the formation and functioning of an online community. Situating this project in a larger discussion of collaborative education, I examine how the newly established subjectivities of students and teachers both reflect and problematize the traditional understandings of community.

The analysis of subjective power and knowledge suggests the idea of online community as open source, which points to the individual agency of every constituent of the communication process and promotes consideration and inclusion of the subjective understandings and performances of communal interactions. An open source community observes a shift from
building and preserving the communal to locating it in the practices and performances of community members. I argue that a vibrant, multimodal, and flexible idea of community could be a revisable structure based on the needs, skills, and goals of the users and the possibilities of the technology that harnesses online communication.

The project also emphasizes the need of an additional exploration of the power relations in limited-access entities, such as online classes, mapping the ways in which subjective power plays into the construction of community, and welcoming the individual knowledges and performance of communal communication online that present new possibilities for a more inclusive, diverse, intellectually-fair and challenging education.
For Natalia and Gleb. You are my everything.
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COMMUNITY REVISITED:

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INTRODUCTION

The study of online collaboration has been a true companion of research projects on online teaching and learning. First envisioned by Licklider and Taylor in 1968 (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004), and defined and popularized by Rheingold in 1993, online (or virtual) communities have now become “an accepted part of the lives of Internet users” (Bishop, 2007, p. 1881). Studies of communal interactions have emerged and thrived across academic disciplines. In fact, the popularity of the topic led Wilbur (2000) to claim that online or virtual community is “among the most used, and perhaps abused, phrases in the literature on computer-mediated communication” (p. 45). Referring to the hype surrounding the exploration of online communities across the academic and professional worlds, Shumar and Renninger (2002) note:

Many theorists, researchers, and practitioners – groups who don’t typically ‘peak’ to one another – all appear to share a common interest in the community enabled by the Internet … These discussions range from the need to redefine community, based on the dynamic and seemingly elusive qualities of virtual community; to concern for appropriate indices and measures for describing a community in the process of rapid change; to effort to identify the nature of users, how they are interacting, and their needs. (p. 1)

A number of studies, early and recent (e.g., Baym, 1998; Jones, 2002; Kollock & Smith, 1999; Rheingold, 1994; Slated, 2002) have invested significant effort into exploring questions ranging from whether online communities are to be built or if they “occur on their own, ‘organically’” to whether online communities are “imagined” or “real” (Jones, p. 368). Others have placed emphasis on the impossibility to analyze the virtual outside the “real” (e.g., Jones,
1998; Wellman & Gulia, 1999) and critiqued the treatment of online community as “a separate reality” and “an isolated social phenomenon,” not taking into account how interaction on the Net fit other aspects of people’s lives (Wellman & Gulia cited in Jones, 2002, p. 368).

In their overview of existing scholarship on online communities, Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) assert that “the new media literature overflows with theoretical analyses and empirical studies of online groups” (p. 39). They mention such areas in the online community research as exploration of “culture and rituals of particular online forums,” examination of “ways in which existing local communities employed the new medium to discuss pressing issues and to build stronger bonds among citizens and neighbors,” and use of online community “to stimulate team work and productivity” (39). Stressing the vastness of such research, Feenberg and Bakardjieva posit:

> Cutting across all these empirical research orientations were philosophical debates that disputed the good and the ill, the promise and the danger inherent in this new form of social life. (p. 39)

The abundance of research on online communities, however, has not been able to address many of the basic questions about the concept, the possibility, the construction, and the functioning of a community online. Wellman and Gulia (1999) note that almost a decade into tenure at American universities and colleges, an online community yields more gray areas than clear ones. They, therefore, argue that, “the paucity of systematic research into [online] communities has raised more questions than even preliminary answers” (p. 188). Pointing to the many assumptions in research on online communities and emphasizing the importance of further studies Wellman and Gulia warn of the considerable proportions of such enterprise. They thus conclude:
The subject [on online community formation and functioning] is important: practically, scholarly, and politically. The answers have not yet been found. Indeed, the questions [emphasis added] are just starting to be formulated. (p. 188)

Resonating with Wellman and Gulia on the idea of complexity of online community research, Bell (2001) points to several reasons why such research creates more controversy than unity. In particular, Bell argues that online community “highlights the tensions between different standpoints on the promises and limitations of cyberculture” (p. 92). A cyber-community, Bell emphasizes, “has at its heart an argument about the relationship between online life and off-line ‘real life,’” … [and] it involves making arguments about the status of [real life] communities as well as online communities” (p. 92).

The embeddedness of online community in the experiences of everyday life and its reflection of and influence on the communication practices and patterns of identity formation make online community a colossal research enterprise which requires continuous investigation and theorizing. The goal of this chapter is to review the existing research on online communities and discuss several directions and assumptions that have defined the theory and practice of online community since its early days. Grounded in the belief that online community is an evolving discourse, which creates unique power relations among the participants and enables unique subject positions, this dissertation project explores the formation and functioning of an online community as affected by the subjectivity of the online learner. The study, which uses the data from two online classes, focuses on how the unique subjectivities of online community members both reflect and problematize the traditional notion of community. I argue that the subjectivity of the online learner calls for re-visiting the notion of online community and demands a continued exploration of its qualities, its educational potential, and its limitations.
CHAPTER I: OVERVIEW AND JUSTIFICATION

The Social Binding of Cyberspace

An underlying foundation of much of research on online communities is the widely accepted idea of the communality of the cyberspace and its conduciveness to the formation of social binding that was quickly labeled as one of key futures of “online community.” Baym (1998) explains that, from its early days, the “scholarship on computer-mediated communication (CMC) was oriented toward organizational uses of computing” (p. 35). Baym’s example of such organizational use is the study of how online group interactions could enhance various work processes, i.e., group decision making. Scholarship, Baym concludes, “finally caught up with what many users of CMC had already known: Social relationships thrive online and have since the beginning of interactive computing (p. 35).

The social binding produced while interacting online remained a recurrent theme of much of research on online education throughout the 1990s. In his well-known book, *Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, Howard Rheingold (1994), a keen explorer of online communities, stresses the *shared interests* of online communicators as the building blocks of community. Such shared interests, according to Rheingold, trigger social binding and lead to the formation of a communal space. Rheingold’s belief in the automatism of the establishment of community online is as complete as it is striking. Speaking of online communication in general, he proposes to “think of cyberspace as social petri dish, the Net the agar medium, and virtual communities, in all their diversity, as colonies of microorganisms that grow in petri dishes” (as cited in Bell, 2001, p. 6).

The process of community formation, according to Rheingold (1994), is underwritten by the inherent desire of humans to socialize, while the internet technology is the right tool to
accommodate that desire. In fact, online community is almost a by-product of the internet technology: “Whenever CMC technology becomes available to people anywhere, they inevitably build virtual communities with it, just as microorganisms inevitably create colonies” (p. 6).

The idea of social bonding is echoed by Norris (2004) who sums the attitude toward online group interactions in the following statement:

Americans who are most active in online groups feel that the internet widens their experience of community (by helping them to connect with others who have different beliefs and backgrounds) or … deepens their experience (by reinforcing existing social networks). (p. 40)

The social binding of online group interactions reinforced a well-established metaphor of community, whose value in social, educational, and professional settings in hard to overestimate. As Baym (1998) notes,

For many observes and participants [at the advent of scholarship on CMC], the word ‘community’ seemed appropriate for the new social realms emerging through … online interaction, capturing a sense of interpersonal connection as well as internal organization. (p. 35)

The adoption of the term “community,” however, brings to the world of computer-mediated communication more confusion than convenience and clarity. Jan Fernback expresses a concern directly related to this project: while “community is a term which seems readily definable to the general public … [it is] infinitely complex and amorphous in academic discourse [because] … it has descriptive, normative, and ideological connotations … [and] encompasses both material and symbolic dimensions” (cited in Baym, 1998, p. 35). Baym elaborates on this idea by saying:
Despite – or perhaps because of – the term’s intuitive appeal, these normative and ideological connotations have made its use controversial in the academic and popular work surrounding CMC. (p. 36)

Given the above mentioned controversy, it is fair to say that the ideas of the social binding inherent in online communities and communality of cyberspace are in dire straits of establishing and upholding validity: The content of both ideas is heavily influenced, if not entirely controlled by the existing idea of community. The normative and ideological connotations both Fernback and Baym talk about, reflect the imposed conventions of the existing discourse on community rather than and let online community speak in its own right as a unique discourse of the era of cyberlife.

Online Community in Composition Studies

Similar to other fields, the assumption of a communal potential inherent in online group interactions has largely defined composition studies. Blair and Monske (2003) call the scholarship’s emphasis on online community “pervasive” (p. 443). Informed by the social construction movement, much of the research of the 1980s and 1990s supports theories of collaborative learning. Kenneth Bruffee’s “community of knowledgeable peers” sets a model for an electronic network in which students learn with and from each other (Blair & Monske, p. 443).

Numerous arguments of the last decade or so have focused on the importance of the having collaboration online. Wall and Peltier (1996) stress that “computers can help nurture student relationships within a classroom community” (p. 210). Discussing their experiences with peer reviews done in an online class, they argue that students’ communal closeness “allows them entry into the critical work required” (p. 211). In an example Wall and Peltier provide, students
chose to not only work on a peer reviewing assignment in the electronic space of an online class, but also met outside of class, having initially become “comfortable conversing with each other in the non-threatening universe of [the software the class utilized]” (p. 212).

Grounding herself in a positivist assumption about computers’ ability to define human interactions, Fleckenstein (2005) stresses a need for developing “communal accountability,” a driving force for successful online learning. She defines the term as “reciprocal commitment among individuals to act in ways that promote the evolution and health of their interconnections” (p. 150). Communal accountability, Fleckenstein explains,

requires people to recognize the value of group cohesiveness, their inherent interdependence, and their individual responsibility for the well being of one another. For affiliation to flourish, members have an obligation to engage in activities that fuse them into a whole, because it is only with the thriving of the whole that the needs of the individual are defined and met. (p. 150)

Sharing Fleckenstein’s view of the role of technology in the construction of class relations, Owens and Luck (2006) discuss an example of an e-learning project at Liverpool Hope College in which the development of a community played a crucial role for the overall class success. The authors report that the small “special interest” groups the class was divided into “have formed into communities, which fulfill social needs for friendship, support, and interaction” (p. 319). The space and the context of the online community appeared to be “a safe environment” in which the students shared their expertise as well as “confirm[ed] their own self-worth.” Owens and Luck conclude that their “virtual community of learners has become a robust and self-reliant reality” (p. 319).

In all, the three premises of many research projects that explore online communities are
a) online communities can be defined in the language of traditional, offline communities; the former have the structure and qualities at least similar to the latter;
b) online environment is conducive for building a community; and
c) community benefits classroom interactions by creating an atmosphere of trust, support, and assistance

These three assumptions seem to have become cornerstones in both the theory and practice of online teaching and learning.

Problematizing Online Community

In this project, I argue that the above assumptions about online communities are affected by two complex themes that have defined practice and research of computer-mediated communication since its advent. The first theme is the egalitarian debate on online communication that was one of the prevalent arguments in the early scholarship on CMC. The essentializing of online communication, I argue, bears a stamp on the theory and practice of online communities, while the positivist qualities assumed of any limited-access interaction result in an improbable expectation of any such interaction becoming an online community.

The second theme is the earlier-mentioned overall drive toward community-building which, as the following section of this chapter demonstrates, is affected by the sociological vision of community in light of the classic dichotomy discussed by German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies. The following review suggests that both the egalitarian debate and Tonnies’ dichotomy instill limitations on the array and types of communication enabled online. The two themes, I argue, constrain the discussion on online community by essentializing the qualities of the latter, putting forth standardized expectations from online communities, and failing to analyze and utilize the unique feature of the discourse of online communities. The next part of
the chapter maps the ways in which each of the themes has affected our understanding of online communities and sets a direction for new research on online community.

*The Egalitarian Debate*

Among the celebrated and heavily debated topics in online education of the early 1990s, the alleged egalitarianism enabled by online communication has enjoyed a tremendous amount of spotlight. During that time, a recurrent theme in many publications was that of a more egalitarian nature of online interactions as compared to the face-to-face communication. The optimism of the now classic 1991 publication titled “The Rhetoric of Technology and the Electronic Writing Class” by Gail Hawisher and Cynthia Selfe is quite representative of the time. The authors argue that writing instruction can improve in “carefully designed electronic settings” (p. 58) as,

students experience different kinds of intellectual ‘spaces’ in which they can learn differently and sometimes more effectively than in more traditional academic forums; instructors can become better acquainted with their students; many of the status cues making face-to-face discourse are eliminated, thus allowing for more egalitarian discourse; collaborative activities increase with a greater sense of community in computer-supported classes. (p. 58)

Referring to several major journal publications and edited collections of the early 1990s, Blair and Monske (2003) point to the similarity of conclusions: “almost any networked activity will be a means to decenter the traditional classroom space and to disrupt the position of teacher as the figure of mastery … allowing students from all backgrounds to be heard” (p. 444).

Many of the current visions of online writing instruction are associated with the more democratic and inclusive power relations. For example, Barab, Thomas, and Merrill (2001) stress
the “more ‘participatory’ models of education [where] students are not receivers of someone else’s information and imposed meanings, but instead are actively involved in the creation of their own understandings and meanings” (p. 108). They add that “the learning climate that develops online is more supportive in terms of promoting reflection, intimacy, and community than are those climates that emerge in the traditional classroom learning environments” (p. 105).

Kearsley (cited in Trinkle, 1999) emphasizes that the instructor does not monopolize attention in an online environment and claims that, “there is no counterpart to standing at the front of the classroom pontificating to a captured audience until the bell rings” (p. A29). Agreeing with him, Faigley (1992) argues that, “electronic discussions both invite participation and seriously limit a teacher’s ability to control the direction they take” (p. 185). He also posits: “Just as the authority of the teacher is decentered, the authority of the text is also decentered in electronic discussions” (p. 182). Mikulecky (1998) asserts that “web-based students […] get to know each other better and treat […] one another with more warmth and dignity than did students in [offline] classes” (p. 96). These and similar opinions are a clear and powerful indication of the ability of online communication “to allow for divergent perspectives, to balance power relations between teacher and students, to give a voice to marginalized groups, and to provide opportunities for the thoughtful, reflective discourse that characterizes critical thinking” (Fauske & Wade, 2003, p. 157).

However, as online education evolved over its first decade and made its way into campuses of most U.S. colleges, the egalitarian view of online discourse has been challenged by a number of research projects that, at best, criticize and, at worst, dismantle various constituents of its universally acclaimed goodness. During the 1990’s, Belcher (1999), Janangelo (1991), Regan (1993), and Takayoshi (1994) address various implications for such groups of online
interactions as women, minorities, and non-native speakers. Trinkle (1999) mentions a 1999 report on distance education from the National Education Association, claiming that “online courses may disrupt the student-and-faculty interaction that creates a ‘learning community’” (p. A60). Fauske and Wade (2003) maintain that, although the role of the instructor in an online class does change, he or she is still responsible for the organization, monitoring, and assessment of the teaching/learning process. They admit that, “instructors’ continual monitoring of postings can be inherently oppressive to certain students and ideas” (p. 143) and argue that, “many of the same prerogatives of instructors in traditional settings [such as assessment or guidance] apply to [online classes]” (p. 141). On a similar note, Matsuda (2002) affirms that, “online discourse communities do not diminish hierarchical social relations found in offline discourses [and] may only allow the negotiation of criteria for hierarchical relations, thus providing an alternative site for the negotiation of identity and power” (p. 39). Evidently, the instructor retains a lot of the traditional power and controls much of the communication process online.

The many points challenging the egalitarian view of online technology demand a more complex understanding of online interactions. Jones (2002 questions the validity of the “democratic vs. undemocratic” debate:

Just because the spaces with which we are now concerned are electronic there is not a guarantee that they are democratic, egalitarian or accessible and it is not the case that we can forgo asking in particular about substance and dominance.” (p. 20)

Romano (1993) calls the assumptions of egalitarianism engendered by technology “invidious.” She explains: “if the technology is inflexible, infallible, and ever-enabling, then human beings absorb blame for [its] failure” (p. 25). One of the main questions that, according to Romano, should occupy the minds of online educators must be “not how can we affirm that technology
converts classrooms into egalitarian spaces, but rather what are the multiple phenomena--positive, negative, and polyvalent--that networking facilitates or mandates?” (p. 26). The acknowledgement and consideration of these multiple phenomena mark an important departure from the instrumental approach to technology and are a crucial condition for building a critical technological literacy – an ultimate goal of teaching, learning, and researching with computers.

Overall, Jones’ and Romano’s arguments correspond to a larger idea about technology education expressed by Selfe and Hawisher (2004): “access to computers alone is […] not sufficient for the acquisition and development of digital literacy” (p. 227). Just like a computer can never guarantee its user’s ability to use it, let alone understand the consequences of such use, so can an online entity, like class or interest group, never warrant conditions conducive for effective communication and/or learning. Speaking of online networks as vehicles of education and communication, Blair and Monske (2003) emphasize that the extent to which [they] … are empowering is in fact context-based, requiring analyses of pedagogies, ideologies, and student and teacher subjectivities – and recognition that these variables, as part of any action or teacher-research methodology, are often not generalizable to every electronic learning environment. (p. 449)

By essentializing online education as a common practice of today’s schooling, we, as teachers and researchers, run the risk of disregarding the situatedness of this practice in the plethora of things that make up the social, political, economic, and ideological aspects of our lives. In order to avoid such disregard, we must develop a more “critical engagement with technological literacy issues must allow for wide variations in social, political, economic, and ideological positionings, and wide variations in teachers, students, administrators, citizens, and
communities” (Selfe, 1990, p. 430). Such critical engagement, I argue, is a sure way to becoming fit for a life in the information age coming upon us.

The Egalitarian Debate and Online Community

While the assumptions about the egalitarian promise of online education have been contested, problematized, revised, and/or rejected, the discussion of online community – its formation and functioning (which, I argue, has developed parallel to the discussion of egalitarianism) – has remained influenced by the essentialist attitudes toward technology of the late 1980s-early 1990s. The inflexible belief that any limited-access online entity is susceptible to the formation of community or that any such entity can be interpreted, and/or classified using the language and categories of the face-to-face community points to the obvious intersection of the essentialist logic of the egalitarian view on online learning and the positivist logic of building communities online. That is, just like the egalitarian view disregards the cultural, political, and economic situatedness of an online educational endeavor, a unified approach to an online community strips it of a situatedness in the contexts of online communication. Overall, while “community building is frequently considered a desirable part of online learning, [and teachers] encourage students to build a community from which they later must depart or disengage” (Kazmer, 2005, p. 25), the scholarship on online communities pays very little attention to the type, structure, and specifics of online communities. Overall, it seems that the idea of a community that has long been associated with face-to-face interactions has been transferred to online interactions. Our assumptions about such interactions as well as our expectations from them have made a similar inferential leap.

It should be mentioned, however, that some scholars have voiced similar concerns and even dangers of essensializing online communities. Renninger and Shumar (2002), for example,
have stressed that achieving the communal potential, which is inherent in online interactions, may not be “automatic, easy, or necessarily enduring.” These authors have compared community building in online settings to freedom, which “is a fragile accomplishment that must be constantly worked at and watched over” (p. xxv). Wilbur (2000) has pointed to the many aspects of human identity that factor in the formation and interpretation of online community. He has emphasized that any study of online community will require a researcher to do “a difficult job of picking a path across a shifting terrain, where issues of presence, reality, illusion, morality, power, feeling, trust, love, and much more” (p. 54).

Baym (1998) has warned us not to label every interaction in a closed – access environment (e.g., an online group or class) as community because a group may have “inadequate interaction to sustain the development of group-specific meanings” (p. 63). Likewise, “a group whose participants remain highly task or topic-oriented might choose [emphasis added] not to develop socially.” Finally, a group may happen to be “openly divisive … offering little, if any sense of community” (p. 63). Given the above reasons, Baym has stressed that “it is fundamentally reductionist to conceptualize conceptualize all “virtual communities” as a single phenomenon and hence to access them with a single judgment” (p. 63).

Taking Baym’s point closer to the idea of re-imagining or re-visiting online communities, Wilbur (2000) posits:

We should be prepared to find community under a wide variety of new circumstances, in a broad range of environments, and intermingled with any number of elements that seem to work against the development of ‘sufficient human feeling.’ With their eyes wide open and using the tools we have inherited – with some respect for the memetic inheritances
that they carry – CMC researchers may be able to carry forward the study of community in directions which we had not previously even imagined. (p. 55)

The liberation of online community from the essentialist/positivist dogma of always accompanying online interactions is an important step toward a better understanding of human communication and a significant promise of more critical, democratic, and informed living, teaching, and learning.

Conceptualizing Online Community

Having discussed the intersection of the egalitarian debate on CMC and the scholarship on online communities, it is appropriate to proceed to the second major theme that has influenced the theory and practice of online communities. That is, it is time to analyze the development of the concept of community that, as the following part demonstrates, has fueled major assumptions about online communities.

It has been argued that the current assumption about the web’s enabling or even encouraging online community is rooted in the classic sociological theories about community per se. Relying on Ferdinand Tonnies, a forefather of contemporary sociological theory, Shumar and Renninger (2002) note that the notion of community has evolved from the pre-modern concept of Gemeinschaft (community as kinship or partnership), which stands for “coherent community in which culture and family are intact, and social life is whole because of this” (p. 3) to the modern concept of Gesellschaft (community as society, association, or company), which marks “a loss of traditional community values and structures and replaces them with impersonal relationships and fragmented cultural values” (p. 3).

Bell (2001) further explains the distinction between the two. The pre-modern “idea” of community, he notes, is
characterized as a ‘total community’: as fully integrated vertically and horizontally, as stable, long lasting, as comprised as a dense web of social interaction supported by commonality and mutuality, manifest in shared rituals and symbols – as a social contract embedded in place and made durable by face-to-face. (p. 95)

Gemeinschaft, Bell continues, is “a ‘traditional’ community where everyone knows everyone, everyone helps everyone, and the bonds between the people are tight and multiple” (p. 95). A community member is a Gemeinschaft is “someone’s neighbor [but] also their workmate and the person they go drinking with and their relative” (p. 95). The bonds are naturally developed and easily preserved due to the small and typically closed-access character of a given group (e.g., a village, or a family) and the considerable dependence of the group members on one another. A natural, organic, and self-fulfilling social entity, Gemeinschaft is Tonnes’ ideal yet lost type of community, a village community of the pre-industrialism, which was based on kinship relationship, inherited status, communal closeness and support.

The evolutionary successor of Gemeinschaft is “the social arrangement” that Tonnies called Gesellschaft, which is brought to life owing to such processes as urbanization, industrialization, and, later, globalization and technologizing of the world. The new era people are “removed from Gemeinschaft-like situations and thrown together in the dense heterogeneity of the city” (Bell, 2001, p. 94). The relationship among the members of a Gesellschaft-like community are shallow and instrumental. Bell calls such relationship within such social arrangement “disembedding” and argues that it “impoverishes communities” (p. 94).

Studdert (2005) explains that while community (the Gemeinschaft type) “comes to represent … something lost [and] impossible” (p. 29), its altogether opposite positioning defines all social interactions. He elaborates:
Community … is the implicit yardstick against which all versions of sociality and human interactions are judged – the state, civil society, class, even, dare I say it – network sociality’s, post-social relationships, plural networks’, flexible webs’, active trusts’, communities of choice, power networks and Social Capital. [Its] formulations seek precisely the sort of encompassing and binding capacity perceived to belong to the lost community. And this search, located somewhere between what cannot be acknowledged and what cannot be ignored, continues to be creative of … tension … [and] a conflict between the common sense meaning and the methodological problems inherent upon its use. (p. 29)

In all, in Gesellschaft, kinship relations have been replaced by material capital while deliberate will and practicality have replaced essential will and organicity. The opposition of Gesellschaft and Gemeinschaft results, as Tonnies argues, in a consistent attempt of the humans to regain or rebuild the lost ideal while relying on the material, the practices and the ideologies that do not correspond to, if not find themselves at odds with, the pre-modern idea of community. David Bell (2001) mentions “nostalgia” describing the influence of Gemeinschaft on both theory and practice of online communities. He asserts:

The ideal of community enshrined in Gemeinschaft has an enduring legacy in popular imagination [and always seems to be] tingled with nostalgia. It might be argued, in fact, that community has become overwritten by nostalgia, in that the way it is talked about so often focuses on its perceived loss, or decline, or erosion. (p. 94)

Bell and Valentine (1997, cited in Bell, 2001) warn that the very word “community,” which is used in countless associations, from “care in the community” to the “Community Hall”; from “community spirit” to the “business community” is “not only descriptive, but also
normative and ideological” (p. 93). Elaborating on that idea, Shumar and Renninger (2002) say that “community” has remained in the hands of social scientists who “create a kind of fiction about the relation of time and historical movement that does not apply to many specific locales” as community is defined “as that we have lost to modernity” (p. 4). They further posit:

The definition of community informs the image held, the words used to describe community, and the sets of expectations concerning what community can be. The definition is further complicated since … so many companies are trying to use the term “community” to do everything from building brand awareness to trying to get users to provide technical support. (p. 4)

They conclude by stressing the need of recognizing the “many strategies and diverse goals in the uses of the word ‘community’” and acknowledge the many ways to build, accommodate, or explore community online (p. 4).

Shumar and Renninger (2002) further argue that “the organization of community has become … individualized and less structured by larger social forces of class, work, geographic location and the like” (p. 5). Defining online communities in terms of or by contrast to Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft, because those terms are “comfortable and feel right …may keep us from recognizing forces that structure social relationships and … forms of social relationships that are being enacted in computer-mediated communication” (p. 5). Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft or their intermediaries or successors are “not necessarily reflections of the realities of community” (p. 5). Being fluid and dynamic, Shumar and Renninger posit, online interaction, “does not easily fit former static images of community” (p. 5).
The approach to online community, which Shumar and Renninger (2002) advocate, is grounded in a notion of “community as a multilayered communicative space” (p. 12), an evolving and malleable entity influenced by the individual positioning and agency of the participants. Emphasizing the novelty of this evolving and malleable entity of online community, Shumar and Renninger argue that any involvement in online collaboration allows individuals to “accrue knowledge about the possibilities for community participation that differs radically from what they once understood the components of community (e.g., group, boundaries, participation, identity) to include” (p. 13). The community-builders, therefore, “are positioned to change themselves and their communities” (p. 13).

In all, the scholarship’s reliance on rigid dichotomy of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft in defining or otherwise handling online community inevitably leads to a disregard of the evolving discourse of online community, a failure to interpret its origin, meaning, and parameters, and a difficulty to utilize its potential for people communicating, co-existing, or collaborating online. The need for problematizing or re-visiting online community is therefore apparent while a rigorous effort driving such problematizing and re-visiting is long overdue. Haythornthwaite (2002) compares the exploration of online community to a black box that is yet to be looked into. This looking inside, she argues, should help “examine what types of interactions and associations make for a community” (p. 160). The call for a closer examination of the discourse of online community is also strong in the most recent work of Jan Fernback (2007), which reads:

If scholars continue to paint internet studies with the broad brush of community, they dilute the potential of the research to understand how online communities are constituted, how they operate, how they are integrated into offline social life, or what they provide. (p. 66)
Stressing the need of “a turn toward [exploring] the nature of commitment in online social groups,” Fernback calls to move “beyond community as a paradigm of online studies” (p. 66) and into a more critical and a more conscious examination of this phenomenon.

This project responds to the call of scholars like Haythornthwaite and Fernback to re-examine, and, possibly, re-conceptualize online community, and attempts to break the paradigm of online studies by challenging the essentialist approach to community and problematizing the inflexible sociological dichotomy of Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft. The concept that comes to challenge the positivist assumptions about online community is that of discourse that helps study online community as a topic in its own right and a socio-technological formation in its own merit. Enabled by and dependent on modern technology, the discourse of online community is capable of producing new power and generate new discourses and, by doing so, challenge human perceptions and practices of selves, others, and reality.

New Directions in Scholarship on Online Communities

This study of online community (that should eventually lead to its re-establishment) begins with Jones (2002) who has pointed to the three issues that have defined and limited the scholars’ vision of and approach to online community. Jones posits:

First, scholars are still too focused on ourselves and insufficiently attentive to the ways in which others [i.e., members of online communities] value and define community.

Second, while looking for how community is “made,” we overlook its ever-presence.

And third, while trying to find community, we fail to look for its disappearance. (p. 372)

The first point clearly overlaps with the earlier claim of the more individualized organization and understanding of online community and the more complicated role played by the online community members in its formation and functioning. Jones implies that the scholars’ focus on
themselves results in approaching an online community as “an obvious gold mine,” a pedagogical panacea with whose help “people will find ties that bind, no matter what, no matter where” (Jones, 2002, p. 373). Indeed, the theme of many research projects is how to construct an online community or how to utilize its potential more fully. The focus, therefore, is on the skill of initiating, building, or maintaining an online community – in its preconceived, inflexible, and idealized concept – rather than on a thorough understanding of its composites, its conditions, and its possibilities.

The second point in Jones’ argument reinforces the idea of the scholarly disregard for the study of the unique composites of an online community as opposed to the unified, desirable, pedagogically sound qualities of group interactions within a limited-access such as online classes, blogs, or social networks. As a result, Jones argues, “much as comparative studies of online versus face-to-face communities … the stories we tell about our perceptions and interpretations of online communities tend toward the explanatory, prescriptive, and exhortatory” (p. 369).

Therefore, Jones’ second point invokes a larger argument of computer literacies, which, as Selber (2004) has noted, is “too often a one-dimensional enterprise” by which how-to guides dominate educational processes while “look[ing] right through the complexities and uncertainties of actual situations of use” (p. xii). A failure to take into account the unique conditions of online communities as well as a failure to notice, recognize, and analyze the literacy practices that define the formation and social interactions in such communities may lead to online communities becoming a dull and useless enterprise whose potential has never realized under the weight of the traditional educational machine.
Finally, Jones’ third point brings up the idea of a transformation and evolvement of online community, which “the one-sided techno-optimism of the promoters of a brave, new world in the World Wide Web” (Renninger & Shumar, 2002, p. xxv) seem to ignore. Jones’ idea of the disappearance of online community, therefore, resonates with the recurrent call to think outside the stereotypical pre-modern/modern community and re-imagine communities in light of the new media, the new agency enabled by such media, and the new possibilities that such media create for the construction of identity and communication. The symbolic disappearance of online community stands for a need of a new perspective in approaching online interactions. As Morley and Roberts (1999) suggest, this new perspective demands our repositioning of selves in the new cultural space enabled by the modern technologies, our reconciling of our “cognitive existence in hyperspace [and]… in the virtual space” with “our bodily experience sin localized space,” our repositioning “in local space without falling into nostalgic sentiments of community and Gemeinschaft,” and our continued search and analysis of the new forms of identity and of bonding that are possible and appropriate” (p. 347).

Jones’ three points set the discussion on online communities in a new and much appropriate direction. They focus on what needs to be done and, more, importantly, what can be done in order to re-examine, expand, and deepen our understanding of online community and to better utilize its potential for the practices of online and offline communication.

Further Research on Online Communities

To proceed with the discussion of new directions in the scholarship, I believe it is important to acknowledge that several recent publications have questioned the uniform approach to online community. Blair and Hoy (2006), for example, have focused on the issue of visibility of communal interactions to argue that “successful online instruction must include a range of
interactions between students and instructors that extend the more public concept of community to better acknowledge the importance of personal, private interaction” (p. 32). Anderson (2006) has emphasized the considerable disregard of the students’ agency that characterizes modern scholarship on online communities. In particular, he has noted that,

Studies of online learning reveal aspects of the dynamics of online interaction, but most are conducted without specific focus on the carefully negotiated nature of the relationship between individual agency and the social structures within which people operate as agents. (p. 112)

Quan-Haase (2005) has argued to expand the boundaries in which online communities are understood and stressed that “it is important to understand online communities in the context of people’s everyday lives [treating them as] a unique way of learning that requires further investigation” (p. 2). Bishop (2007) has proposed a conceptual framework to study online communal interactions that put emphasis on the user’s (or actor’s) desire to act, the limitations of such desires by the actor’s goals, plans, values, beliefs, and interests, as well as the actor’s perceptions of his or her environment (pp. 1886-1887). Bishop’s study, which explores participating dynamics in online communities, indicates a need of shift from a how-to or a needs-based understanding of online communal interactions to a closer examinations of the users’ perceptions of the online space as a communal environment and their developing of beliefs in, as well as plans of building and upholding a community online (p. 1891).

Speaking of online learning in general, Kazmer and Haythornthwaite (2005) have advocated “looking at the design, use, and impact of online learning from multiple perspectives, i.e., paying attention to the many stakeholders involved – students, faculty, technical staff, administrators, family, employers, and co-workers” (p. 7) and singled out community formation
as one of the “dimensions of social interaction” that, along with learning, professional socialization, family dynamics, career, and institutional change, form the very experience of teaching and learning online. Resonating the idea of community as a dimension of social interaction expressed by Kazmer and Haythornthwaite (2005), Bregman and Haythornthwaite (2003) have suggested to that communicative practices of online communities form an evolving genre of persistent conversation, whose key features, such as visibility, relation, and co-presence, are to be reckoned with while theorizing and generalizing about community building.

Similarly, Baym (1998) has called the researchers’ attention to the on-going discourse of online communities, whose “stable patterns of social meanings … enable the participants to imagine themselves part of a community” (p. 62). Bell (2001) has elaborated on the idea of the exploration of discursive patterns of online community and calls analyzing such patterns “a … strategy for getting inside online communities” (p. 100). Bell is most interested in the exploration of “social codes developed within online communities … [which are] the ways in which members of communities establish group norms and find ways to put these in place” (p. 102). The social codes, Bell argues “reveal the implicit assumptions about what makes a community … and they reveal the limits of the community” (p. 102).

In this project, I build on Bell’s idea of exploring the implicit assumptions within an online community. In order to do so, I turn to the works of such theorists as Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault, among others, to consider online group interactions not as an extension or a replica of face-to-face discourse, but as a discourse in its own right in which unique power relations among the students and between the students and the instructors are produced. I also rely on the ideas of Jacques Lacan to explore the online learner’s subjectivity, the production of which is enabled by the format of online communication. Without any intention of questioning
the benefits of collaborative learning in general or online collaboration in particular, I propose examining how the subjectivity of the online user helps revisiting the notion of online community.

Community as Discourse

As mentioned earlier, the inflexible or unitary understanding of online community is challenged by the concept of discourse in which conventional ways of meaning making are refuted. According to Foucault, “discourse,” is a system in which certain knowledge is possible. Online communal interactions are a part of this system; they find themselves situated in a web of relationships with other discourse constituents – i.e., people, ideologies, and histories. In “What is an Author?,” Foucault argues that discourse cannot only be analyzed by “its architectonic forms,” such as codes and symbols embedded within the text. By the same token, the codes and symbols, online communal interactions being one of them, cannot be considered apart from the other discourse constituents with whom they are involved in an intricate interplay. Discourse, Foucault (1980) concludes, may only be analyzed with respect to its “placement” in a social context, which involves the dissemination and value of the discourse as well as the author’s relationship to and society’s adaptation of the discourse (p. 163). Acknowledging a limited agency of the speaker/observer, Foucault stresses that the knowledge produced in discourse is not a sole prerogative of either one of its members or constituents. Rather, it is a product of “relations between institutions, economic and social processes, behavioral patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, [and] modes of characterization” (Foucault, 1980, p. 143).

Applied to the current discussion, the Foucauldian idea of discourse is vital for the reconceptualization of online community, which scholars like Kazmer and Haythornthwaite
(2005), Baym (1998), Bell (2001), and Jones (2002) have called for. A logical departing point for such reconceptualization is an examination of the unique power relations produced within the discourse of online community. An ultimate objective of this examination is an exploration of the agency inherent in online community members, which should lead to a larger-scale analysis of the unique subjectivities enabled and reinforced by the virtuality of an online class.

The analysis of power relations, leading to a deeper understanding of the formation and functioning of online subjectivities, is a necessary condition enabling generalizations about the structure and meaning of online communities. In this respect, an exploration of the discourse of online communities is an epistemic endeavor which both reflects and constructs the reality of today’s online communication. In *Rhetoric and Reality*, James Berlin (1987) emphasizes that meaning is made “from individuals engaging in rhetorical discourse in discourse communities – groups organized around the discussion of particular matters in particular ways” (p. 166). Bartholomae (1985) echoes this idea:

> when I think of ‘knowledge’ I think of it as situated in the discourse that constitutes ‘knowledge’ in a particular discourse community, rather than as situated in mental ‘knowledge sites.’ (p. 145)

I believe that an informed look at the discourse of online communities will enable teachers and researchers to construct a more complete and accurate picture of the conventions and processes that inform today’s communication, online and offline. A better understanding of the constituents, dynamics, and politics of online discourses, as well as their affordances and limitations, can help us turn academic cyber spaces into sites where critical literacies are born and practiced and conscious knowledge is produced. Online users’ sustained practice of approaching life and educational experiences in terms of discourses and their ability to “read”
and join discourse on communities will result in new generations of thinkers, whose abilities will extend beyond categorization of experience and whose word will be less limiting. The recognition of those whose competences, weaknesses, and insecurities constitute everyday practices of communication and research in composition studies should cause both teachers and students to become more conscious and more responsible communicators.

Project Parameters

In this dissertation project, I examine online interactions in a distance learning class, focusing on the subjectivities, which are enabled and enforced in the discourse of online community. Using both quantitative and qualitative data collected in the class, I explore the role the online subjectivities play in the formation and functioning of an online community. Situating my project in a larger discussion of collaborative education, I aim to explore how the newly established subjectivities of students and teachers both reflect and problematize the traditional understanding of community.

Realizing that any discussion of subjectivity is impossible without a discussion of power, I first explore the power dynamics in one fully online class – English 207 “Intermediate Writing” (ENG 207) – taught by me in the Fall of 2006. To study the power dynamics, I advance following research questions:

RQ 1: What are students’ participation dynamics in ENG 207?

RQ 2: How does the class negotiate power relations?

RQ 3: What roles do the students perform and how?

The power dynamics data collected as part of this project set the direction for the examination of the subjectivity that is, as the following chapter demonstrates, internalized and
performed by the participants of online interactions. In an online class, Bill Anderson (2006) argues,

Students have the power to post messages in the small group and whole class discussion spaces, or not post them, and to read messages in those discussion spaces, or not read them. These spaces are those formally associated with class work in the program. Additionally, students can engage in interaction beyond the confines of the “authorized” (small group and whole class) discussion spaces in a number of ways. (p. 114)

To address the major concern of this study – the formation and functioning of an online community as affected by the subjectivity of the online learner, I advance the following research question:

RQ 4: How is community constructed online?

The relatively low number of students enrolled in ENG 207 – 7 – allows presenting a detailed account of each of the students. The data from three individual interviews complement my observations and analyses.

The Following Chapters

The current chapter has reviewed the existing scholarship on online community and argued for a need of re-visiting its concept, practices, and potentials. Having analyzed the influences of the egalitarian debate and the classical assumptions of community-building on the theory and practices of online community, I have argued for a need to study the latter in terms of “a discourse in its own right,” rather than an extension of any existing or dominant discourse that may inform, affect, or precede it.

Chapter two, a theoretical grounding for the project, contains a detailed discussion of the concept of discourse and its relevance to the study of online communities. It also maps the
process of subject formation and points to the promise that subjugation extends to the online user. The internalized subjugation bears consequences on the individual choices of online users, but also changes the features and dynamics of what constitutes an online community.

Chapter three discusses ethnography as the preferred methodology for the project, provides insights into data collection processes, and contains a detailed description of the study’s research questions.

Chapter four presents the findings of the study and their discussion, while chapter five advances conclusions and recommendations for further research.

I believe that the project helps collect valuable information about the formation of an online community as well as explore how online subjectivities affect, problematize, and/or revise online communities. Such information is useful for building a stronger theoretical foundation that informs online education and help enhance the pedagogies applicable to online classes. Given the growing popularity of online instruction and the plethora of un- or underexplored topics in online communication, this research should not be viewed as either all-embracing or groundbreaking. My goal is to contribute to the existing conversation in the field and sparkle additional interest in the exploration of power that defines online interactions.

The findings of the study inform our knowledge of the production and dissemination of power among the humans and (as scholars like Haraway contend) *between* the humans and the machines. Realizing the enormous dimensions of the enterprise, I keep the discussion open not only for challenging our existing assumptions and beliefs about power but also contesting the philosophical and epistemic grounds for such assumptions and beliefs that, as Foucault argues, have been imposed on us for centuries.
CHAPTER II: ONLINE COMMUNITY THEORIZED

The Overview

The idea of approaching online communities as discourses in their own right discussed in chapter one is the centerpiece in the theoretical grounding of this project. As the earlier discussion implies, the unique discourse of online community allows speaking of new power relations among the people involved in academic interactions online. In the argument that follows, I posit that these new power relations are a result of the changed agency that is afforded by the unique subjectivity of the online community members. I draw from Foucauldian discussion of discourse and power to present online community as a site for discourse formation. Then, turning to such theorists as Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Judith Butler, I make a case for the malleability and productivity of the discourse of online community that account for the emergence of new power structures and thus new “rules of the game” within online community as a newly established discourse.

The second part of this chapter takes a closer look at the phenomenon of online subjectivity, which, I argue, is a defining force of power production, circulation, dissemination in the discourse of online community. To approach the online user as a subject, not object of online interactions, I turn to Jacques Lacan’s and Slavoi Zizek’s discussion of the self as well as Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony. I then review Donna Haraway’s concepts of vision and situated knowledges to map the ways in which online subjectivities manifest themselves within the discourse of an online community. In light of the theoretical framework, outlined in this chapter, the empirical part of the study concerns itself with the exploration of the subjectivities and power relations in the community of a single online class taught at Bowling Green State
University. The findings of the study aim to undermine the uniform notion of community that has informed the research and practice on collaborative education over the past three decades and calls into question the validity and effectiveness of collaborative pedagogies. I therefore argue that the findings of the study mark a need to revisit and revise collaborative pedagogies to better reflect the epistemologies of doing and embodiment that have defined teaching and learning, online and offline.

Discourse: An Introduction

Approaching the discourse of online communities as a discourse “speak[ing] in their own behalf” (Foucault, 1978, p. 101) warrants a closer examination of the notion and the structure of discourse. In The History of Sexuality, Foucault defines discourse as “a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable” (p. 100). He adds that, “discourses are tactical elements or blocks operating in the field of force relations; there can exist different and even contradictory discourses within the same strategy; they can, on the contrary, circulate without changing their form from one strategy to another” (p. 101). There are three principles implied in these statements that will inform my further discussion of discourse: a) discourses are malleable; b) the existence of one discourse does not exclude the existence of other discourses; and c) the formation and functioning of a discourse is closely connected with the formation and dissemination of power.

As a discourse, an online community may originate in and have various qualities of traditional/face-to-face community, yet the very establishment of it as an independent category begins “to demand that its legitimacy … be acknowledged” (Foucault, 1978, p. 101). Such acknowledgement, Foucault posits, is made “in the same vocabulary [and] using the same
categories” that are borrowed from other discourses, the ones that proceed or the ones that co-exist and co-develop with the newly forged one.

Further, Foucault (1978) warns against dividing discourse “between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one [and envisions instead] … a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies” (p. 100). He believes that discourses have been misread “since the demise of the Sophists” (1980, p. 206). He posits that discourses – that have long been regarded as merely “the dress of thought or conveyer of preexisting meaning” (p. 202) – actually produce meaning instead of merely representing it. For Foucault, the author, meaning, and knowledge are a function of discourse, not its source (p. 202). Therefore, discourse must be approached as “a practice, a form of action, and not as a reflection of the world” (p. 203). This view of discourse necessitates a broader understanding of the power relationships inherent within discourses and those producing those discourses. It is important that researchers comprehend this new relationship in order to make informed judgments about online communities.

Finally, In The Order of Discourse Foucault emphasizes the epistemic potential of discourse, welcoming the arrival of a discourse that empowers the communities of people participating in its creation. In the voice of an imaginary “institution,” Foucault states:

You should not be afraid of “beginnings”; we are all here in order to show that discourse belongs to the order of laws, that we have long been looking after its appearances; that a place has been made ready for it, a place which honors it but disarms it; and that if discourse may sometimes have some power, nevertheless it is from us alone that it gets it [emphasis added]. (cited in Bizzell and Herzberg, 2000, p. 1461)
Apparently, any involvement in the discourse of online communities enables or entitles each participant to create discourse matter. Likewise, an informed analysis of a discourse allows the researcher to influence its development as it brings forth the issues of social interaction, individual and communal formation, and epistemic practices that define such discourse and situate it in the intricate web of truths and practices of social interactions at large.

The researcher’s role in the formation of the discourse of online community serves as a powerful incentive for this project. As both an online community member and a primary investigator of the online class analyzed, I use my observations and analyses to build a more solid theoretical foundation for online community and map out the ways in which online community could enhance teaching and learning in today’s highly technologized academic world.

Exploring the Rules of the Game

The formation of a community is traditionally associated with the physical and social space of a class, an organization, or any other membership-based or limited-access group. Thomas Bender’s defines community as follows:

A community involves a limited number of people in a somewhat restricted social space or network held together by shared understandings and a sense of obligation.

Relationships are close, often intimate ... Individuals are bound together by affective or emotional ties rather than by a perception of individual self-interest. There is a ‘weness’ in a community; one is a member. (cited in Galston, 2004, p. 63)

An online community is grounded in the physicality of the hardware and software of the employed technology (i.e., physical space), but also the bodies and personalities of the people
engaged in online interactions (i.e., social space). To reflect social unity, an online community is regarded with a plethora of names that denote “closeness” or “connection.” Woolgar (2002) uses the word “society”; Hine (2000) and Bell (2001) talk of “online- or cyber-culture” while Jones (1998) uses the phrase “social network.”

Being a social entity, online community merits anthropological and sociological research. In 1994, Elizabeth Lawley’s was among the first to urge to use more “anthropological and sociological theories to study individual interactions in a ‘culture of computing.’” Lawley argued that such theories are particularly useful in better understanding the impact of computer technology of human behavior and interaction” (p. 4). To analyze “online cultures,” she drew from the theoretical constructs of Field and Habitus developed by French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu. Regarding Bourdieu’s model as enabling “a study of the conditions of production of academic knowledge, technical expertise, and bureaucratic power in contemporary France,” she proposed to substitute “the milieu of ‘cyberspace’ for [Bourdieu’s] contemporary France” and views computer-mediated communication as an “environment,” a “virtual culture” and “community” trying to both understand current practices and anticipate future changes in the cultural milieu. The following part provides a brief overview of Bourdieu’s theory.

**Bourdieu: Field and Habitus**

Bourdieu’s *Homo Academicus* (1988) analyzes social relations within what he calls a *Field*: “a microcosm within the macrocosm constituted by the broader social space” (Davis, 2005, p. 173). The entire university for Bourdieu is “a space of positions perceived through the properties of the agents who hold its attributes […] and who struggle, with arms and powers capable of producing visible effects, to take or defend them, to perceive them unchanged or to transform them (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 76). As Davis explains, “each field is […] composed of
people occupying positions as the dominant and the dominated class, or occupying positions between these two extremes of power” (p. 173). An important mechanism in the functioning of any field is its habitus, “the cultural assumptions and mostly explicit rules of the game” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 17) that are learned and internalized by individuals within than field. To understand habitus, Hoy (2004) explains, one must understand the idealistic concept of embodiment and “recognize the difference between that idea and a more traditional philosophical notions of habit” (p. 105). Hoy refers to Merleau-Ponty, who exemplifies this concept with a syllogism “being a worker means having a consciousness of being a worker” (p. 105). Hoy further emphasizes the contrast between habit and deliberation or decision of the will and, maintaining Bourdieu’s own statements, claims that, “habitus is acquired from early experience and then forgotten; it becomes ‘a second nature’ that is ‘the basis of the perception and appreciation of all subsequent experiences’” (p. 107).

Bourdieu interprets his approach to understanding culture as being different from the phenomenological search for a perceptual level prior to the social level (2000, p. 150). Like Foucault (1979, 1980) and Butler (1997), who both emphasize the role of the social in the formation of the subject, he exclaims: “The body is in the social world, but the social world is in the body” (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 152). Bourdieu’s habitus, therefore, appears to be a reflection of a societal experience of the subject or a societal dogma, imposed on the subject, that foregrounds his or her actions within a certain field. If so, it is the concept of an online community itself that must legislate the students’ and the teachers’ behaviors in its field. I thus believe that by studying the habitus of a particular online community we could obtain valuable insights into the ways in which students and teachers perceive communication in online classes in general.
Productivity of the Field

Bourdieu’s theory allows approaching the community of an online composition class as a microcosm of relations, a culture of unique power forces that are both assumed and expected in that environment. Bourdieu also stresses the productivity of the field as he emphasizes its “structuring structures” (1988, p. 72). In other words, the philosopher believes in the ability of the field to produce its own discourse and thus produce and mediate its own power relations. Foucault (1980) echoes this idea in *Power/Knowledge*. Speaking about the entire society, he claims that

there are manifold relations of power that permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated, nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation, and functioning of a discourse. (p. 17)

Wood and Fassett (2003) argue the same as they talk about computer-mediated communication. In an online class, they say,

one discovers a quizzical corporeal rhetoric etched upon and woven through the body of the computer-augmented instructor, a performance that emerges through the interplay of place and space …, evok[ing] strategies of social order, calling forth a space of interaction – utterances, pauses, statements, and silences – tactics of resistance that often demean both instructor and student. (p. 294)

As such, the discourses of online communities may and do contain a potential of producing relations different from those in other discourses (even though they may originate, be produced, or be highly influenced by those other discourses). Analyzing these discourses is vital in understanding “virtual lives … [that] differ significantly from the lives we know [and] … virtual
societies that mean the reinvention of all that is familiar” (Jordan, 1999, p. 2). Foucault urges us not to perceive any discourse as “once and for all subservient to power” (p. 40). Rather, he asserts,

we must make allowance to the concept’s complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling block, a point of resistance, and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces [emphasis added] power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. (p. 40)

An important implication of the above statement for this project is this: as a unique discourse, the discourse of online communities both reflects the qualities of traditional/face-to-face communities and redefines these qualities, challenging and/or reinforcing rules and conventions.

In light of the productive nature of discourse, especially in reference to online communities, we arrive at a need for a more complex understanding of the relationships produced in this discourse (e.g., students and technology; students and students, students and instructors, etc.). Taking Foucault’s idea of discourse as a series of discontinuous segments and his idea of power that is born in unique environments, both physical and rhetorical, such as of online discourse, I argue that it is erroneous to ignore the conventions of the newly formed discourse (i.e., online education) while analyzing and generalizing about issues that arise in it (e.g., formation and functioning of a community). I thus stress the importance of the meticulous exploration of discursive practices of online communities and a more rigorous analysis of its constituents, participants, and conditions.

As an evolving discourse, online community is not only a constructed environment, as Lawley (1994) suggests, but also an environment that constructs itself and that produces
“structured structures [or] … principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations” (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 72). As stressed earlier, an exploration of habitus – or the (new) attitudes, beliefs, and practices within an online community – affords researchers a chance to detect and analyze the tendencies that, thanks to the growing popularity of online instruction, are likely to shape the world of collaborative education in the years to come.

Online Power, Surveillance, and the Subjugation of the Online User

Commonly approached as “virtual lives […] that differ significantly from the lives we know” (Jordan, 1999, p. 2), the discourses of online education raise various questions concerning new power relations they produce or encourage. As the previous chapter has argued, the optimism of the early and mid-1990’s associated with the assumption of egalitarianism of online interactions gives way to prudent and critical evaluations of the online classes that are argued to pose problems similar to traditional/face-to-face classes. A common line of argument concerning online educational interactions touches upon the surveillance potential of the online technology. For example, Simon Kitto (2003) has recently argued that online interactions limited by the boundaries of an online class, “have the potential to operate as a powerful panoptic technique for observing, classifying, and normalizing the individual and the collective” (p. 5). According to Kitto, students may be compared to the workforce under surveillance; teachers/administrators are charged with monitoring every bit of their performance as long “work” (i.e. study) is in progress, which allows them (i.e., the observers) to easily control the observed. This constant observation (or the very idea of it) drives the former to follow the rules diligently.

With no intention to dismantle Kitto’s argument in its entirety or to ignore the potential surveillance possibilities allowed by the internet technology, I propose a different way of analyzing online interactions in a closed-access environment like an online class. Reviewing the
Panoptic qualities of an interaction observed and, allegedly, controlled by one person (i.e., the teacher), I approach what Kitto reduces to an object position for the online learner as his or her subject position in which the observed (i.e., the student) gains or restores agency. The agency of the subject leads to the production of unique power relations that define the discourses of online education in general and online community in particular.

To describe the process of subject formation, I fist review the history of the discussion on surveillance and Panopticism and then, relying largely on Lacan’s theory of the self and Gramsci’s decimating of the hegemonic rule, I oppose the succumbing to the power of the observer and the self-repression that Panopticism advocates to the emergence of subjectivity that results in the formation of new power and creation of a new discourse. The theoretical framework of subjugation, I believe, is a powerful reinforcement for the earlier discussion of discourse and its productivity. Driven by the newly established subjectivities, the discourse of online community generates its own structure and results in the formation of its own “habitus,” informed by yet also informing other discourses within and outside of the realm of online education. An exploration of the substance and structure of the discourse of online community as affected by the subjectivity of the online learner is the sole purpose of this project. While serving as a theoretical grounding for this dissertation, the current chapter previews the methodology for exploring this substance and structure as it points to the need to investigate the power relations formed within the newly established discourse and studying the online learners’ understanding, and performance of what we commonly refer to as online community.
Panopticon: The History

As mentioned earlier, the surveillance possibilities in an online class are attributed to the “Panoptic effect” whereby the observed internalizes the feeling of being surveillanced and acts as though in self-control, staying aware of being watched or monitored at all times and thus adhering, willingly or not, to the rules and laws of the particular Panoptic social institution.

The term “Panopticon” was coined by Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), an English writer, reformer, and philosopher who offered a design for a “limited access” institution efficient from the standpoint of monitoring its occupants. The success of a panoptic institution does not depend on a large number of officers who observe occupants meticulously. In fact, Bentham’s panoptic tower may require no physical observer, as it may be empty most of the time. As all occupants can be observed, they do not necessarily have to be observed to abide by the set rules of a given panoptic institution. The point of Bentham’s Panopticon is to train individuals to see themselves as being seen. The feeling of being observed gets internalized in the minds of the observed; “they learn to monitor their own behaviors, effectively participating in their own disciplining” (Campbell & Carlson, 2002, p. 589).

Michel Foucault applies the concept of the Panopticon to a broad spectrum of social practices characteristic of the Western civilization. For him, the Panopticon metaphorically represents the ultimate achievement of Western European societies, which … moved from exacting physical punishments on the body to producing disciplined subjects through discourse. (cited in Campbell & Carlson, 2002, p. 589)

In Discipline and Punish, Foucault calls the Panopticon, “a cruel, ingenious cage” (p. 205) yet also “a marvelous machine, which, whatever use one may wish to put to it, produces homogeneous effects of power” (p. 202). He further emphasizes that the panoptic gaze (or the
idea of a gaze that is deeply rooted in the minds of the observed) “induce[s] in the [observed] a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures automatic functioning of power” (p. 201). He concludes that, “whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behavior must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used” (p. 205).

Being a locus of power, a panoptic institution is based on very patriarchal, top to bottom power relations, as it involves the production of a hierarchical architectural formation that helps “provide a hold on [the occupants’] conduct … make[s] it possible to know them, to alter them” (Foucault, 1980, p. 172). The simple yet extreme hierarchy of the Panopticon leads to the production of “normalizing judgment” – the driving force in the dissemination of disciplinary power. The normalizing judgment “does not simply seek to repress, but operates interdependently with hierarchical observation to normalize the collective” (Kitto, 2003, p. 4). Foucault explains that this allows the Panopticon to

Refer … individual actions to a whole that is once a field of comparison; … differentiate … individuals from one another; … measure … in quantifiable terms and hierarchize … in terms of value; … introduce … a constraint of a conformity that must be achieved; … [and] trace … the limit that will define difference in relation to all other differences, the external frontier of the abnormal. (1979, p. 183)

The Panopticon, Campbell and Carlson (2002) argue, “becomes a predictive model, an epistemological machine, that identifies, assesses, and categorizes the individuals” (p. 589).

Using Foucault’s own words, the Panopticon normalizes its inhabitants by comparing, differentiating, hierarchizing, homogenizing, and excluding their behaviors (pp. 182-183). These qualities of the Panopticon inevitably repress an individual and contradict the ideas of multiplicity, diversity, and
egalitarianism of a democratic society cherished and propagated for by the Western world.

*The Panoptic Qualities of an Online Class*

Owing to Foucault, the metaphor of the Panopticon finds its way into the discourses of various social institutions. The field of education, whose structure and power relations have traditionally been highly hierarchical, becomes a podium for expressing concerns, warnings, and even accusations of fortifying a surveillance society that hinges on the duality of power roles and promotes normalization. Online education seems to become *the eye of the storm* here. Overall, the instructor retains a lot of the traditional power, still occupying the observer’s seat in the central tower of the Panopticon. Most often, he or she is the only person in the online community who can set the trajectory of the course by posting new discussion threads or pushing the ongoing discussion in a desired direction. Finally, it is the instructor who has an unlimited access to the course statistics and settings; this feature enables him or her to monitor students’ (in)activity throughout the course and make judgment about their attitudes, efforts, successes, and failures.

Kitto (2003) discusses several accounts of students’ awareness of being watched and emphasizes that this awareness makes the students act in a certain way. He quotes from a male student:

They [the instructor] know when you’ve been on. They know how many hits you’ve had … and I think they might even know what sort of hits we get for the required readings and so they know whether students have been doing their required readings … they can see if you have been trying or not. It’s sort of like attention in class (p. 14), and from a female student:
For the Psycho Social exam, somehow they get the number of hits you have on the web… The people that got good results had the most hits or something on the webpage.

(p. 15)

Both of the students end up having to act as expected because of the internalized feeling of being watched. The instructor does not necessarily have to continuously enforce the rules of the game (just like the observer in the panoptic tower does not); the imaginary panoptic gaze embedded in the physical set-up of an online class instills self-discipline in those who perceive themselves as observed and causes self-repression of any misbehavior. Every student in an online class is aware that such misbehavior may easily be detected and prosecuted by the power holder.

From Surveillance to Subjectivity

Applying Foucault’s panoptic theory to online education allows seeing power relations in online classes as defined by the ideology of surveillance and ultimate panoptic control. However, the Panopticon as an all-embracing metaphor for online classes appears to offer a very inflexible picture of production, dissemination, and possession of power and disregards any agency on the part of the observed. Green (1999) asserts that this conception is hardly representative of the complexity of power relations. Referring to Foucault’s own writings on power, he contends that, “power … is not a commodity, a position or a prize, but a mobile, fluid, multidirectional, productive thing that creates relations within the social sphere” (p. 28). Hoy (2004) adds that, “social beings are not zombies who have no awareness and agency in their formations” (p. 65) and stresses the role of an individual in the social construction of subjectivity. Gill (1995) challenges the assumption that an individual’s worth can be reduced “to a manipulable and relatively inert commodity” (p. 3), while Green emphasizes that the idea of the Panopticon:
is a totalizing story in which resistance and ‘exteriority’ are, by definition, impossible to achieve [and] … a story enabled by an unreflective concept of the individual, a lack of any clear identification of what is not power or who or what possesses it, and a serious inability to locate structural inequality. (p. 28)

One thing the Panopticon seems to leave out completely is that the process of observation or surveillancing imbues in the observed (i.e., the object) some subjective qualities. By realizing itself observed, the object begins to watch itself. This, Green (1999) explains, leads to the formation of an “objectified subject,” which is able to (re)gain agency and formulate individual responses (p. 29). Another problem with the panoptic approach is the disregard of the productivity of power that is produced inside the Panopticon and the ability of a community or a culture (limited by the boundaries of the panoptic institution) to “structure new structures” (Bourdieu) – that is, to produce its own discourse and enjoy its own relations of power. The following part offers additional insights into the formation of a subject as discussed in the works of Lacan. This, I believe, helps to further question the one-directional stream of power in online educational interactions. I further discuss Gramsci’s hegemonic state theory that offers a different look on power relations in a Panopticon-like society.

**Lacanian Subject**

Lacan’s theory, though controversial and extremely complex, serves as a good start for a discussion of subjectivity. An important idea here is the split of the subject “between the ego and the unconscious, between conscious and unconscious, between an ineluctably false sense of self and the automatic functioning of language … in the unconscious” (Fink, 1995, p. 45). The subject may simultaneously be a subject and an object as it travels the plains of the Real, the

Perhaps I am only object and mechanism … but assuredly in so far I think so, I am – absolutely … I can never constitute myself as anything but object … Nonetheless, it remains true that by way of this extreme purification of the transcendental subject, my existential link to its project seems irrefutable. (p. 1301)

The split, Lacan implies, constitutes the being of a subject. As Fink explains, “Lacan’s variously termed ‘split subject,’ ‘divided subject,’ or ‘barred subject’ – all written with [a crossed “S”] – consists entirely in the fact that a speaking being’s two ‘parts’ or avatars share no common ground: they are radically separated” (p. 45). Nurdhug (2004) continues this idea: “On one hand, we alienate the subject from ourselves [through linguistic constructions]. … On the other hand, the subject is a spark that flies between two signifiers in the process of subjugation, whereby that which is other becomes your own (p. 89). Zizek (1996) concludes:

If the subject is to emerge, he must set himself against a paradoxical object that is real and cannot be subjectivized … This uncanny object is the subject itself [italics added] in the mode of objectivity, an object which is the subject’s absolute otherness precisely insofar as it is closer to the subject than anything that the subject can set against itself in the domain of objectivity. (p. 400)

The idea of the multiplicity and complexity of the subject and its obvious dependence on the object is what I rely on as I move on to the next part of this argument. If the object of the panoptic institution (i.e., the observed) helps define (and is present in) the subject (i.e., the observer), it inevitably defines the discourse of the panoptic institution and not only experiences but also produces and possesses the power circulating in it.
Two other of Lacan’s ideas that are of importance here are a) the claim of the ideological construction of subjectivity, and b) the claim of subjectivity as constructed “outside of itself” (Nordug, 2004, p. 87). The first one, I believe, helps to further question the strict top to bottom relations of power in an online class and points to the interplay of subjective and objective qualities in both the observer and the observed. In the conditions of an online class, both the instructor and the students are observed but they also observe. This holding of power, though limited by cultural and political frames of an online class, cannot but play an important role in the change of the overall power balance within the classroom. The agency enabled by the fact of observing serves as a new ideological ground for building interactions in an online class.

The idea of subjectivity as constructed “outside of itself” points to the fact that subjectivity, though an integral part of one’s identity, is constructed, if not imposed, by others by the physical (e.g., software, class format) and social (e.g., communicative patterns and beliefs guiding them) environment of online communication. Subjectivity is therefore a product of both internal and external negotiations of online learners. Studying these negotiations becomes a priority in the exploration of human communication online. In what follows, I offer a brief overview of Gramsci’s discussion of agency in a hegemonic state that could suggest a more “subjugated” view of the “object” of the panoptic surveillance.

*Gramsci, Hegemony, and the Agency of the Subaltern Class*

I turn to Gramsci as his analysis of power relations in a hegemonic state seems to be strikingly relevant to the discussion of the relations in the Panopticon. Gramsci’s notion of “class” serves as a perfect label for the oppressing and the oppressed groups of the Panopticon’s population. Gramsci uses the concept of hegemony to describe and analyze how modern capitalist societies were organized [or were aimed to be organized] in the past and the present
Hegemony is a ruling class’s domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology into their common sense and everyday practices. Political hegemony that informs the system of governing and the system of relations in a capitalist state becomes “a lived system of meanings and values, not simply an ideology, a sense of reality beyond which it is, for most people, difficult to move a lived dominance and subordination internalized” (Holub, 1992, p. 104).

It is hard not to draw parallels between the hegemonic and the panoptic societies as both of them seem to rely on top-to-bottom dissemination of power and a strict control of the ruling class over the oppressed. Although there is no equivalent of Bentham’s panoptic tower in Gramsci, there is a capillary system of control that acts as a surveillance tool. This, I posit, makes the two theories very similar. However, Gramsci’s further discussion of the relationship between the ruling and the oppressed classes under the condition of hegemony appears to be radically different from the one that shapes the Panopticon. As Clegg and Wilson (1999) explain,

In Gramsci’s key theory of hegemony, agency is restored, while the focal project for social power changes – it aims at the building of a constantly negotiated consensus and not … complete inclusion and thereby domination. (Cited in Green, 1999, p. 29)

Holub (1992) also positions that the inferior status of the subaltern class does not prevent it from inventing “new structures of value designed to subvert the hegemonic design” (p. 116). For Gramsci, it is not only the “inherent will to freedom” and “principle of hope,” but also the consciousness of the inferior/dominated/objectivized/oppressed class that makes it raise its voice and seek a balance of benefits “in order to legitimate rule” (Green, p. 29). Overall, Gramsci’s hegemonic state appears to produce more diverse relation of power than those of the Panopticon.
It “implies the presence of dissenting voices, of spots of emancipation, [and] of the continuance of democratic urges and fulfillments” (Green, p. 29).

Approaching an online class as a hegemonic environment opens a new perspective on the (potential) agency that resides in those whose status in a society is other than that of the ruling class. It also allows to speak of the students in online classes not in terms of recipients of the action whose fear of the all-seeing eye has internalized and become part of their sustained objectivity, but as actors whose individual responses are possible and encouraged and whose agency “offer[s] the chance of social inclusion … and democratic rights” (Green, p. 29).

Subjects, Vision, Embodiment, and Situated Knowledges

The above discussion of subjugation and agency takes this argument back to the earlier discussion of discourse, its habitus, and its productivity. It appears that the culture of an online class serves as solid ground for the construction of subjectivities that, in their own turn, end up setting the parameters of online discourses. While Lacan’s idea of the subject helps understand the complexity of relations between the object and the subject in online interactions, it is Foucault’s own thoughts on normalization and individualization that help trace the process of the formation of the subject. Opposed to the top-to-bottom dictatorial management of a panoptic institution, this interaction of subjects results in the production and the sharing of unique power relations. Foucault’s Discipline and Punish (1979) is found of use yet again. In it, Foucault states:

He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection [italics added]. (pp. 202-203)
By assuming the roles of subjects in online interactions, learners as well as instructors co-construct the discourse of an online class and share access to power. Reciprocally, this power “not only acts on a subject, but, in a transitive sense, enacts the subject into being” (Butler, 1997, p. 218). Each individual, as Foucault suggests, appears to be both an effect and a vehicle of power (1980, p. 98). Thus, the online communicators submit themselves to the framework of an online class (e.g., attending and posting to the discussion boards). At the same time, this very framework does not only limit but constructs possibilities for interaction or creativity. For example, each post on the discussion board is a result of individual work where participants appropriate the framework and make room for individual decisions and preferences.

The promise of subjectivity inherent in online interactions calls for a closer examination of the mechanism by which the subjectivities of online learners shape and define the discourse of online community. The subject’s ability to differentiate the self from the other as well as see and act independently from the other invokes the metaphor of vision as most appropriate for describing such mechanism. Vision as a feminist epistemology is given ample attention in the works of Anzaldua (1987), Harding (2004), Hartstock (1983), Jaggar (2004), among others. Donna Haraway (1991) believes that vision is a way to feminist objectivity, opposed to binary oppositions and honoring what Haraway calls situated knowledges. Such situated knowledges, which she sees as legitimate ways of meaning making, are always “partial, locatable, critical knowledges sustaining the possibility of webs of connections called solidarity in politics and shared conversations in epistemology” (p. 191). As many other feminists, Haraway argue[s] for a doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing. (p. 192)
Haraway also insists on “the embodied nature of all vision [and] reclaim[s] the sensory system that has been used to signify a leap out of the marked body and into a conquering gaze from nowhere” (p.188). This gaze, Haraway, explains, “mystically inscribes all the marked bodies [and…] makes the unmarked category claim the power to see and not to be seen, to represent while escaping representation” (p.188). The subjective situated knowledges, along with feminist embodiment and feminist hopes for partiality and objectivity “turn on conversations and codes … in fields of possible bodies and meanings” (p. 201).

Interestingly, the idea of embodied vision, which, eventually, leads to the production of situated knowledge(s), does not imply that knowledge is produced solely by the subject, in opposition to or for a particular object. Merleau-Ponty, whose *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962) is an attempt to deconstruct Cartesian subject-object duality, described embodied knowledge as “knowledge in the hands, which is forthcoming only when bodily effort is made, and cannot be formulated in detachment from that effort” (p. 144). Harris (2003) explains embodied knowledge is “created in the unity between subjects and objects that is the direct result of having a body.” The Lacanian subject re-emerges here: to perform as a subject, the discourse participant must also be an object. The “body” of the discourse participant is thus a unity of the subjective and the objective.

Further, Haraway’s vision grounds itself in the web of “subjugated standpoints,” the positionings of the subjects, which “promise more adequate, sustained, objective transforming accounts of the world” (p. 191). Resonating with Haraway on the idea of situated knowledges of “the subjects or agents of knowledge” is Sandra Harding, a founder of Standpoint Theory, who discusses four factors that bear crucial influence on the formation of vision and situated knowledges. First, Harding (2004) positions, the subjects are “embodied and visible, because the
lives from which thought has started are always present and visible in the results of that thought” (p. 133). For the purposes of this study, this means the following: the subjectivities of the online community members remain present in the recorded online interactions of each online class. Therefore, the recorded interactions among the members of an online community can serve as fertile soil for making assumptions about the power and knowledge produced within that discourse.

Second, Harding (2004) asserts, “the subjects of knowledge are embodied and socially located, [which results in] that they are not fundamentally different from objects of knowledge.” In other words, “the same kinds of social forces that shape objects of knowledge also shape … knowers” (p.133). The inference here is that the subjects, their vision, and their situated knowledges are both the force leading to the formation of and the result of a given discourse. The existence and the transformation of a subject occur within existing discourses and rely on the epistemologies that have created and defined them. Haraway (1991) elaborates on this point by saying the following: “the standpoints of the subjugated are not ‘innocent’ positions.” On the contrary, she argues, “they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretative core of knowledge” (p. 191). Thus, the standpoints or subject positions are themselves part and parcel of the habitus, a set of dispositions that the subject learns and can use given the right social context.

Elaborating on social character of standpoints and situated knowledges, Harris (2003) notes that “the social relationships create habitus, and so this process is bound up with relations of power.” The analysis of the subjective power must thus be informed by the knowledge of a given group of people, belonging to a particular culture and
considered at a given time. Applied to the discourse of online community, the situated knowledges are to be considered within the scope of the knowledge-making practices of the students and teachers involved in online interactions in an online distance class of a mid-size U.S. college.

Harding’s (2004) third point is that knowledge is produced primarily by communities and not individuals. The knowledge and power produced in the discourse of online community become meaningful in social interactions rather than exist within the subjects. While the subjugated standpoints of the online learners are detectable through observation and analysis, their formation, existence, and development are all parts of a discourse, which, on the one hand, enables them, but is enabled by them, on the other hand.

Finally, Harding posits that, “subjects/agents of knowledge … are multiple, heterogeneous, and contradictory or incoherent, not unitary, homogeneous, and coherent as they are for empiricist epistemology” (p.134). The hint here is that any study of subjectivities must embrace the idea of inconclusiveness and malleability of the discourse in which knowledge is produced. Any such study must also recognize the validity of embodied and situated knowledges that are to define literacies, epistemologies, and pedagogies of the future.

Implications for Online Education

The idea of subject formation within the discourse of online community sets the direction for the empirical part of this dissertation project. A study of the vision, subjugated standpoints and situated knowledges of the online community members appears to be an effective way of making informed generalizations and judgments about the discourses of closed access entities, such as online classes. Paying specific attention to the situated knowledges of the community members, the project explores the formation of subjectivities and power relations within the
discourses of two online classes taught at Bowling Green State University. Aiming to contest the uniform notion of community that has influenced collaborative education for decades, I position this project as encouraging a larger, interdisciplinary and many-sided conversation about learning and teaching in online communities. An expected outcome of such conversation is a revised or newly forged pedagogy of collaborative education that would reflect the epistemologies of embodiment, which inform online discourses of today.

Further, an exploration of the agency of both teachers and students in the construction of the educational process should lead to creating pedagogies “forged with” one another (Freire, 1990, p. 33). This means going beyond “libertarian propaganda” aimed at making or letting the oppressor (i.e., the teacher) share the power with the oppressed (i.e., the student). In Pedagogy of the Oppressed, Freire rejects what he calls “banking concept of education” – an epistemology in which “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 58). The method of knowledge-making Freire chooses over banking is dialogue. In dialogue, “the teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught [by the students] …, who in turn while being taught also teach” (p. 67). All parties involved in dialogue “become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow” (p. 67); the relations between the teacher and students are no longer based on authority. Rather, they are driven by the ability to play an active part in the construction of shared knowledge/reality.

The following chapter discusses ethnography as the preferred method of analyzing the discourse of online community and exploring the power relations and subjectivities of online community members. Advancing each of the research questions of the study, the chapter presents a detailed account of data collection and processing, which allow exploring the
formation and functioning of the discourse of online community as affected by the subjectivities of online learners.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The Summary

Exploring the subjectivity of the online user and examining the role subjectivity plays in the formation and functioning of an online community, this project is firmly grounded in the use of qualitative methods of inquiry. To study how the newly established subjectivities of students and teachers both reflect and problematize the traditional understanding of community, I embark on an ethnographic endeavor in an intermediate writing class, English 207, which I taught online in the fall semester of 2006. Although a buzz word in qualitative research, ethnography requires an introduction for the purposes of this project. In this chapter, I first present a short history of ethnographic research; I then discuss why ethnography is an appropriate method for exploring online community and argue for the use of critical ethnography as a methodology for my study.

Ethnography

A study of people’s interactions is “a systematic process in which individuals interact with and through symbols to create and interpret meanings” (Wood, 2000, p. 10), and ethnography is one of the qualitative research methodological approaches to facilitate such study. Ethnography stems from sociology and anthropology (Van Maanen, 1988). In its early age (19\textsuperscript{th} through first half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century) it was “considered little more than an annoyance to serious scholars and was only made palatable, and thereby tolerated, by locating it within ‘anthropological methods’ still presumed to be grounded in … structuralism (Johnson, 2004, p. 67). In the 1950s and 1960s with the failure of structuralism to acknowledge the connection between education and class domination, the methods and means of ethnography became essential and ethnography began to gain credibility (Johnson, 2004).
Ethnography today is an interdisciplinary phenomenon that has spread through many fields where culture is a problematic object of description and critique. Speaking of ethnography in general, Van Maanen (1988) calls this method of scientific inquiry “a written representation of culture” (p. 1); it explores individual and collective subjectivities for the purpose of understanding the practices of different groups or societies. Traditional, or face-to-face, ethnography is usually a combination of some type of observation and depth interviews (Ishmael & Thomas, 2006). Composition studies as a field has a rich history of utilizing ethnographic methodologies. The experiments documented in the defining texts of the field, such as Mike Rose’s *Lives on the Boundary*, Mina Shaughnessy’s *Errors and Expectations*, Peter Elbow’s *Writing with Power or Writing without Teachers*, or Cindy Selfe and Gail Hawisher’s *Literate Lives in the Information Age*, have all relied on the practice of observing subjects and their interactions with others over a period of time. These works have shed light on multiple topics in rhetoric and writing, from gender and to individual literacies, and have thus made the field more conscious of its members, problems, and possibilities.

The technological advancements of the late 20th century have allowed ethnographers to combine or replace the physical integration into the analyzed culture with the recorded representations of such culture. A camera or a sound recording device can routinely assist the researcher in his or her observations:

As the analyst observes the respondent’s behavior, he notes and records unexpected (as well as expected) behavior, then reviews this behavior with the respondent in a depth interview. (Ishmael & Thomas, 2006, p. 274)

Traditionally, Ishmael & Thomas explain,
It is the merging of actual behavior with the participant’s explanation of that behavior that forms the ‘raw data’ that serves as the foundation for analysis. (p 274)

This analysis, “involves an ongoing attempt to place specific encounters, events, and understandings into a fuller, more meaningful context” (Tedlock, 2000, p. 455). Ethnographic analysis, Tedlock concludes:

is not simply the production of new information or research data, but rather the way in which such information or data are transformed into a written or visual form. As a result, it combines research design, fieldwork, and various methods of inquiry to produce historically, politically, and personally situated accounts, descriptions, interpretations, or representations of human lives. (p. 455)

The era of Second Life, Facebook, and other virtual groups and communities triggered further development of ethnographic research. The “cultures” enabled within the limits of a blog, an online class, or a particular social network have served as new and unexplored territories for “the full immersion by the investigator into the environment of the people of interest” (Plummer, 2006).

By the end of the 20th century, the “rapidly changing technologies and theoretical paradigms” of the information began to challenge “the positivist arguments and realist approaches that informed anthropological ethnography … [so] in the late 1980’s … proponents of the ‘new ethnography’ introduced ideas of ethnography as a fiction and emphasized the centrality of subjectivity to the production of knowledge” (Pink, 2007, p. 1). An increased interest in the study of digital cultures informed by “innovations in visual technology, critical ‘postmodern’ theoretical approaches to subjectivity, experience, knowledge, and representation, a reflexive approach to ethnographic fieldwork methodology, and an emphasis on
interdisciplinarity” (Pink, p. 1-2) helped ethnography solidify its role as an effective qualitative research method for exploring the cultures of the postmodern world.

This dissertation project falls under the umbrella of exploring the newly emerged “cultures” of the technologized world. In an attempt to narrow culture to a more manageable entity, I rely on the theoretical concepts discussed in the previous two chapters. That is, online community, or, precisely, the discourse of online community and the sum of the constituents that produce this discourse serves to define the “population” of the study while the rules of the formation and functioning of such discourse, which Bourdieu would call habitus replace the term “culture.” As Chapter Two has demonstrated, the subjectivity of the online user is a crucial concept for the analysis of online community. Thus, taking a closer look at the subjectivities of online community members and exploring their vision(s), the subjugated standpoints, and situated knowledges help construct a representative picture of the “rules of the game” that embody online communities.

Because a study of community presupposes submergence into the culture where it is produced and assimilated, ethnography appears an extremely appropriate research method for the project. In particular, this method is favored for the following reasons: it allows the instructor to maintain close contact with the students for the entire duration of the course and thus collect more representative and reliable data. In the case of English 207, ethnography also provides the researcher (who is also the instructor) an opportunity to be an active builder of the class community, not merely an outside observer trying to study “the rules of the game.” This creates a unique perspective for research – one that combines active participation in the production of actions as well as observation of and reflection on them.
Critical Ethnography

An important emphasis of this ethnographic project is on its departure from the traditional anthropological ethnography which has been known to simply document the uniqueness of a culture under investigation as well as to defend and rationalize the revealed novelty, originality, or difference of such culture. For this study, a mere acknowledgement of the uniqueness of online community and its difference from either the Gemeinschaft or Gesellschaft type would not be a sufficient ground for a large-scale investigation. Therefore, the goal of this ethnographic study is not to exemplify the uniqueness of an online community – the theory overviews in Chapters One and Two have already argued for the uniqueness of the discourse of online community. Rather, its goal is to study online community as an embodied cultural practice of the people, students and teachers, involved in an educational experience of an online class.

I argue that a clearer idea about the assumptions, beliefs, and mechanisms behind the discourse of online community as a practice should lie in the foundation of the pedagogies informing teaching in online settings. I thus position this project as a critical ethnography (Conquergood, 1991; Denzin, 2003; Madison, 2005; Warren, 2006) and consider it as an epistemological endeavor “giv[ing] life to people in context, mak[ing] embodied practices meaningful, and generat[ing] analysis for conditions that make the socially taken-for-granted visible as a process” (Warren, 2006, p. 318).

To explore the users’ assumptions and beliefs as well as the mechanisms of the discourse of online community, I first explore the power production and circulation in the two online classes and consider the power positions of the online community members as subjugated points and examples of subjugated vision. I then track how online subjectivities manifest themselves in an online community and map the ways in which online subjectivities challenge the traditional
notion of community. Discussing the findings in the last chapter of this dissertation project, I ponder the implications of this study for the field of distance education and call for revisiting the collaborative pedagogies that have long defined teaching, online and offline.

The Objects of Research

_The Power Structure(s) of Online Community_

As discussed in the earlier chapters, an analysis of a discourse (i.e., online community) is inseparable from a discussion of power. Thus, an exploration of the power dynamics in English 207 serves as a starting point in the study of their online communities. To explore the power relations in English 207, I use some of the most debatable qualities of online classes as markers for data collection. To start with, I observe the students participation dynamics in the class and interviewed some of the subjects about the behaviors as members of the online community.

To avoid any essentializing about the qualities of online education, I void the participation marker of the positive charge it might contain. That is, instead of assuming that online classes _encourage_ active participation (the assumption that is known to have informed the early age of distance education), I explore _what level of participation_ they had.

To measure the students’ involvement in the online class discussions, I employ the concept of democratic dialogue offered by Burbules (1993) who discusses three rules for an effective discussion in the classroom:

1. The rule of participation, standing for any participant’s ability to raise topics, pose questions, challenge other points of view, or engage in any other activities that define the dialogical interaction (p. 80);
2. The rule of commitment, implying a possibility for any participant to agree or disagree with other participants as well as the instructor (p. 81); and
3. The rule of reciprocity, implying reversible and reflexive behaviors for all participants of a dialogical interaction (p. 82).

The participation and involvement markers aid the data collection for the first three Research Questions of the study:

1. What were the students’ participation dynamics in ENG 207?
   1.1 How active were the students in the class discussions?
   1.2 How did the students interact with each other and the instructor?

2. How did the class negotiate power relations?
   2.1 What was the level of students’ experimentation with and “re-vision” of traditional academic writing? How common were the instances of such experimentation/re-vision (e.g., use of color, lack of punctuation, lack of capitalization, etc.)?
   2.2 What dynamics of question-asking did the class reveal?
   2.3 What dynamics of expressing criticism or disagreement did the class reveal?

3. What roles did the students perform and how?

    Online Community Construction

The power dynamics data collected as part of this project sets the direction for the examination of the subjectivity that is, arguably, internalized and performed by the participants of online interactions. In an online class, as Bill Anderson (2006) argues,

Students have the power to post messages in the small group and whole class discussion spaces, or not post them, and to read messages in those discussion spaces, or not read them. These spaces are those formally associated with class work in the program.
Additionally, students can engage in interaction beyond the confines of the ‘authorized’ (small group and whole class) discussion spaces in a number of ways. (114)

The first three Research Questions of the study provide insights into the actions, decisions, or beliefs on the part of the students that may, as I argue in the next chapter of the project, account for their own understanding of selves as subjects. The unique agency enabled by the subjugation of the online user, as the earlier review demonstrates, enables unique relations within an online group. The internalized subjugation bears consequences on the individual choices of online users, but also changes the features and dynamics of what constitutes an online community. In the final part of this project, I explore the features of online community and speculate about ways in which it revises the very notion of community (as understood in reference to traditional/face-to-face community)

Analyzing the qualitative and quantitative data for Research Questions 1, 2, and 3, I advance the final question of the study:

4. How is community constructed online?

Aiming to explore how the students’ performances in this online class reflect their subjectivities, I offer a discussion of the ways in which the subjugation of the online user affects the construction of an online community. This discussion informs the conclusions and implications of my study.

Data Collection

Qualitative and Quantitative Data

The study used both quantitative and qualitative data for analyses. However, the numeric data are not used for the purpose of generalizing about the communication patterns in ENG 207 but rather for the detection of the practices, individual and communal, existing within this online
community. The limited reliance on the numbers and percentages is informed by Cindy Johanek’s (2000) call for a variety of research techniques in composition studies that can increase the validity of findings. Thus, while being true to its critical ethnographic grounding, this project pays ample attention to both the average student participation and involvement and individual behaviors in order to increase and enhance the exploration of subjectivity and its influence on the formation and functioning of online community. While the data retrieved by way of observation constitute the bulk of the data, the interviews help obtain additional insights into students’ and teacher’s actions in and beliefs about online classes.

The following part of the chapter presents the Research Questions and outlines data collection methods for each of them.

Research Questions

RQ 1: What were the students’ participation dynamics in ENG 207?

RQ1.1: How active were the students in the online discussions?

Quantitative Data

Addressing this question included an ongoing assessment of students’ involvement in online discussions. The discussion threads started by the instructor as well as those started by the students were assessed. The students’ activity was measured against the minimum requirement (i.e., once a week). For all such discussion threads, the numbers of students’ posts was counted.

Qualitative Data

As mentioned earlier, I conducted three interviews with the students in order to get further insights into students’ participation in online discussions. Some of the questions featured in these interviews were:

- What constitutes “active participation” in an online discussion?
How easy/difficult is it for you to join an online conversation?

Do you consider yourself an active participant of online discussions in this class?

What does silence mean? When are you silent?

What are the factors that make you participate?

RQ 1.2: How did the students interact with each other and the instructor?

Quantitative Data

In response to this question, the study analyzed the students’ involvement in the group discussions. In order to assess the level of involvement, I examined the number of posts made by each of the participants on the discussion forums (the discussion threads which I as an instructor initiated) and the discussion threads (the multi-node discussion webs initiated by the students within the discussion forums). By contrasting the level of involvement (RQ1.2) and the level of general activity (RQ1.1), I aimed to assess the communality of the communication in ENG 207 and pinpoint the interaction mechanisms by which such communality was achieved.

Qualitative Data

The following interview questions were used:

How often do you participate in online discussion?

How easy is it for you to participate in online discussions?

As you post your ideas to the discussion board, do you “talk” to the instructor or to the entire class?

How often do you get to respond to other students’ ideas? How often do they react to your ideas?

Do any of the actions of other students or the instructor encourage or discourage you to participate in online conversations?
RQ 2: How did the class negotiate power relations?

RQ 2.1: What was the level of student experimentation with and “re-vision” of strictly traditional academic writing? How common were the instances of such experimentation/re-vision (e.g., use of color, lack of punctuation, lack of capitalization, etc.)?

Quantitative Data

The study also analyzed the instances of experimentation with and revision of traditional forms of academic writing. Some of such forms included but were not limited to use of contractions, use of various fonts, use of color, use of images, ignoring punctuation/capitalization rules, etc.

Qualitative Data

The interviews included questions like:

- Are your online responses any different from face to face discussions? If so, how?
- How easy or difficult is it to express your ideas online? What helps you express your ideas better?
- Are there any differences in terms of standard grammar, punctuation and syntax rules between live and online discussions?
- How encouraging or discouraging are online discussions of experimentation such as use of color, use of various fonts, use of images?
- What other differences between online and offline discussions can you name?

RQ 2.2: What dynamics of question-asking did the class reveal?
Quantitative Data

The study analyzed the number and frequency of discussion threads started by the students. The study also explored the number and frequency of questions asked by the students in online discussions. For this latter analysis, all postings were sorted into two categories: a) response to a question and b) posing a question/topic. The ratios of affirmative/negative postings (i.e., positive or negative statements) vs. interrogative postings are discussed in the Analysis chapter of the dissertation project.

Qualitative Data

The interviews sought answers to the following questions:

- How comfortable is it for you to ask questions online?
- How similar or different is the process of asking a question online to that of asking it in a face-to-face class?
- If you feel like asking a question, who do you direct it to?
- Have you ever started a discussion thread on a discussion board?
- How often do you respond to the questions of other students?
- How often do you respond to the questions from your instructor?

RQ 2.3: What dynamics of expressing criticism or disagreement did the class reveal?

Quantitative Data

To address this question, the study focused on the postings that contain some disagreement. Responses containing disagreement with the instructor as well as those containing disagreement with fellow students were analyzed.

Qualitative Data

The following questions were asked in the interviews:
• How comfortable is it for you to express disagreement online?
• Do you feel comfortable when others disagree with you?
• Is your reaction to that disagreement from a fellow student different from that from the instructor?
• It is easy to disagree with a) a fellow student and b) the instructor?

RQ 3: What roles did the students perform and how?

Quantitative Data

To address this question, the study analyzed the students’ assumptions about own roles and the roles of the other class participants (i.e., students and instructors) in the creation of online interaction. Two of the markers for the study of roles were

• Number and ratio of dialogic responses (inviting a further discussion or responding to a previous post) vs. monologic responses (responding to the generic theme of the discussion forum, not expecting involvement in dialogue)
• Reliance on self and others in the production of knowledge in ENG 207.

Qualitative Data

The interviews featured questions like those below:

• Do you expect to get responses to your postings from the instructor/students?
• Do you feel obligated to respond to the postings of others?
• How do you usually react to postings that contain some disagreement with what you say?
• Do you expect other students’ responses to address your questions or merely relate to the general theme of the discussion
• As you respond, do you address the concerns of those who posted before or try to express your own concerns/ideas?
RQ 4: How was community constructed online?

Quantitative Data

Research Question 4 used the same quantitative data as RQs 1-3. That is, the participation and power dynamics revealed in the course of the study served as a departing point for further insights into the nature of and reasons for such dynamics.

Qualitative Data

To address community construction, the study explored the students’ understanding of “online community” and analyzed the patterns of community construction that revealed themselves in the work of the students. The interviews featured the following questions:

- What are some of the features of an online community?
- In what ways does an online class encourage/discourage formation of a community?
- In what ways was the class a community? In what ways, was it not a community?
- What are the temporal and physical boundaries of an online community?
- What makes an online interaction more or less communal?
- Give an example of some of the features of the class that were “communal.”
- Who are the members of an online community?
- How easy is it to join an online community?
- How many members make a community?
- Who do you consider an active member of an online community?

The following chapter presents a detailed account and analysis of the collected data. As a critical ethnographer and a person involved in the teaching of one of the classes (English 207), I strain from positioning the results of my analysis as generalizeable across the vast and varied terrain of online learning. Considering my project a contribution to the body of scholarship on
online communities and hoping that the findings of it will enhance the pedagogies that inform online education at large, I regard the study as an epistemic experiment of my own and an attempt to understand the embodied practices of teaching, or learning to teach online.
CHAPTER IV: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The Prologue

The original plans for this study included observation of two online communities: one in a class I taught, English 207, and one in another class, English 112, an introductory writing course, which was taught by another instructor. However, as I recorded my observations in both classes and coded the data, I had to abandon analysis of English 112 data due to two primary reasons. One reason was my inability as a primary investigator to analyze student communication beyond the innumerous messages that would correspond to weekly activity. That is, having excess to private communication between the students and the instructor, being unable to analyze course statistics, and having conducted one interview with a student as well as one with the course instructor, I found myself failing to observe representative communication patterns in this class. The other reason for abandoning the English 112 part of the project was my apparent inability to join the community of the class. As I enjoyed no authority to either participate in the class interactions or merely observe all student activity (2 out of 8 students in the class opted out of the study) and as I was able to conduct only two interviews, I considered it ominous for the project to discuss communal interactions without having the exposure to such. Given the two issues with the English 112 sample, I focused entirely on the English 207 data sample. I recognize that the conclusions it is advancing are based on the very limited amount of data collected in one online class. As well, I admit to positioning myself, almost exclusively, as an observer rather than a co-creator of the community. In the spirit of the contestation of the Panoptic theory that informs this project, this is done in order to focus primarily on the subjectivities of the observed and, allegedly, the subaltern, i.e., the students, and to more thoroughly focus on the workings of their subjectivities.
Exploring the users’ beliefs about and performances of community, the study aims to undermine the uniform notion of community that has informed collaborative education over the past three decades and calls to revisit and revise collaborative pedagogies to reflect the embodied approaches to teaching and learning. Acknowledging the limited scope of the project, the conclusions are positioned as a contribution toward a body of research on online communities.

To establish connections beyond university campuses, Chapter 5 discusses the idea of open source, “a development method [used in software production] that harnesses the power of distributed peer review and transparency of process” (esr, 2006). Open source stresses constant revision and improvement which every peer’s input brings to the software product production:

> When programmers can read, redistribute, and modify the source code for a piece of software, the software evolves. People improve it, people adapt it, people fix bugs. All this can happen at a speed that … seems astonishing. (esr, 2006)

The metaphor of open-source, though foreign for the field of online education, points to the individual agency of every constituent of the communication process and promotes consideration and inclusion of the subjective understandings and performances of communal interactions. What is observed in a community as open source is a shift from building and preserving the communal to locating it in the practices and performances of community members. A vibrant, multimodal, and flexible idea of community could be a revisable structure based on the needs, skills, and goals of the users and the possibilities of the technology that harnesses online communication. Approaching online community building as an open source endeavor could pave the way for future research on online communities. The last chapter of the project also emphasizes the need of an additional exploration of the power relations in limited-access entities, such as online classes, mapping the ways in which subjective power plays into the construction
of community, and welcoming the individual knowledges and performances of communal
communication online that present new possibilities for a more inclusive, diverse, intellectually-
fair and challenging education.

Positioning of the Findings

As a project located in the online environment of a distance learning class, this study
utilizes electronic writing as material evidence for the conclusions outlined in this chapter.
Acknowledging writing as a product influenced by the writer’s environment and the specifics of
rhetorical situation of the writing act, the analyses presented in this chapter reflect the social-
epistemic philosophy that underlies this project. As I advance my argument, I strive to locate the
meaning of my findings within the fabric woven by the subjugated standpoints and situated
knowledges of the discourse constituents. I consider my own observations an integral part of this
fabric. Thus, being an ethnographic project, this dissertation is, to a limited extent,
autoethnographic.

Many research projects have looked at the concrete conditions in which teaching and
learning processes occur. Coulon (1995) mentions several studies that explored how former
students learn to perform the role of university students and how the classroom social
organization materializes in specific practices. Similarly, I studied the written performances of
the seven ENG 207 students with an eye to explore their participation dynamics in an online
class and to examine what power relations form in such class, and how community is
constructed. In addition to the written artifacts (i.e., posts, email messages, and course statistics)
that became available to me in the course of ENG 207, I relied on the interview transcripts with
three students in ENG 207.
Positioning this project as an ethnographic study, I involved myself in an observation of the common practices of online community construction and explored how members of the online classes both performed community and conceived of it. Thus, observing the members’ performance in online interactions and talking with them about their experiences allowed pursuing the members’ meanings and getting an accurate idea about the online subjectivities and the communities they help construct.

The data collected in the course of this study allowed for two major conclusions. First, the class power relations and participant subjectivities were constructed and negotiated via multiple ways of interaction afforded by the online technology. That is, the power and subject construction reflected the agency with which the class participants interpreted the class rules and performed communication online. The five ways in which the agency of the online subject played into the class structure were:

1. Students’ participation took on several forms and included some students’ extensive reliance on private communication with the instructor and the peers, as well as “silent participation” by which the student would not produce any posts in public forums yet would be present in class by regularly signing on and reading the posts of the others.
2. Students’ involvement in the class discussions was limited as interaction was mostly localized and short-lived.
3. The public forum interactions yielded a high level of formality and seemed to imitate formal academic conversations.
4. Question-asking and expression of disagreement were more characteristic of female participants.
5. The class members did not assume the same roles of their peers as they did for themselves.

Acknowledging the significant difference within the group of students in ENG 207 and positioning the different modes of participation in the theoretical framework of discursive power production and subject formation, I deem the rich and varied participation dynamics recorded in ENG 207 to be manifestations of subjectivities in online educational interactions.

Grounding the participation dynamics in the theoretical framework of power and agency formation and circulation, I advance the second major conclusion of the study – the subjugation of the online user makes online community an open-source concept whereby a) the collective is a by-product of an assignment-driven interaction located in time and fueled by a need to communicate rather than an opportunity to interact with others; and whereby b) community is individually embodied by each of its members and is affected by their skill and need level.

The next part discusses the participation dynamics of the class, following the research questions advanced in Chapter 3. As I draw the link between the variety in the participation dynamics and the subjugation of the participants, I analyze the effect of this phenomenon on the experience of community construction in this online class. Finally, I theorize about online community in a subjugated environment of an online class and preview the discussion of pedagogical implications which constitutes the core of the last chapter of this dissertation project.

Participation Dynamics in English 207

Defining Online Participation

As is customary in much of present day teaching and learning, ENG 207 was designed with a set of requirements pertaining to attendance and participation and a very clear message to violators of such requirements: if you do not participate, you will fail the class. As indicated in
the Methodology Chapter of this project, I planned to rely on the minimum participation requirement to address RQ1.1 *How active were the students in the class discussions?*

Looking back on ENG 207 as a teaching experience, however, I have to admit that the actual implementation or, in my capacity as an instructor, “enforcement” of the participation requirement was the least “straightforward” element of the class endeavor – primarily so because *online participation* itself or, even more precisely, participation in the collective experience of this online class proved to be a highly individualized and product- rather than process-driven virtue.

While I had set the minimum participation requirement at one response to the weekly discussion thread and one response to the posting of a class member, the actual activity varied by the assignment and by the week. At least three out of seven students who expressed consent to participate in the study remained active for the entire duration of the class. One male student, Seth, exceeded the expected participation minimum by 450% having posted more frequently (an average of 9.1 times per week), while two female students, Ashley and Kim, averaged 7.2 and 6.8 posts a week, respectively. Both of the figures indicate significant enthusiasm with which these students have treated the class discussions and activities. The following chart summarizes the average posting activity (by the discussion thread and the week) for all seven students:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Average activity per forum (in number of posts)</th>
<th>Average activity per week (in number of posts)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Seth</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ashley</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Kim</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Weekly Activity.

As seen, two out of seven class members (i.e., Felipe and Sam) fell short of meeting the participation requirement, while another one (Carl) met such requirement marginally, failing to post as frequently as was required in seven out of the sixteen weeks of the semester. David’s participation varied from the rest of the students: while the number of his posts remained considerably low for the duration of the course (i.e., 2.7), the number of “hits” or visits that he made to the Blackboard page of ENG 207 exceeded the minimum participation requirement in each of the sixteen weeks.

The numbers of daily and weekly visits was automatically counted by the “Course Statistics” of the Blackboard software. While students were unaware of this function and, generally, the number of visits did not constitute a part of the grade, I, the instructor, relied on these data in providing trimester feedback, which either praised the high activity of the students or pointed to a lack thereof. As mentioned earlier, David’s participation was marked by a discrepancy between the number of posts he made and the number of times he visited the class site and read and reread the posts of other students and the instructor without indicating his
presence on the site. Overall, the average weekly visit readings (in numbers of hits) were as follows:

1. Seth – 73
2. Ashley – 80
3. Kim – 107
4. David – 88
5. Carl – 29
6. Felipe – 9
7. Sam – 12

Thus, Seth, an obvious leader in the number of posts, trailed “the less active” Ashley, Kim, and David in terms of time spent reading the posted materials. On the other hand, Kim, whose posting activity was higher than required appeared to have spent even more time being invisibly present in the class discussions.

The “silent participation” phenomenon was striking because it dealt with the issue of participant’s choice not to post. The making of this choice, as Webster (2002) suggests, symbolizes a break away from the collective that cyberspace has enabled. For example, my first trimester feedback on David’s participation was rather harsh: I criticized his apparent non-involvement with the class discussions and urged him to be more active. David was among those students who expressed nervousness before the class and stressed his lack of experience with online education. Thus, having asked for help and direction, he could have been one of those learners who gladly follow the instructor’s guidance. Surprisingly, he was not. The feedback did not significantly change David’s participation dynamics. While he posted enough to meet the minimum participation requirement, he focused on the study and analysis of the class postings
and other course materials, which made him invisibly and effectively active in this class. Owing to such communication/participation strategy, David managed to produce highest quality written work and get an A grade, well representative of his aptitude and achievement.

David’s example could be an indication that being present in class without being visible to others was a prerogative of the online users as well as a form of their appropriation of the class space (e.g., Graham, 2002; Lyon, 2002, Turkle, 2005). Such appropriation, or use in one’s own ways and to one’s own needs, provides ground for further reexamination of what activity means in online classes and push further discussion of adequately measuring, analyzing, assessing, and appreciating such activity.

It should be noted that the “working instead of talking” strategy is characteristic of many conscientious yet sometimes shy students in regular face-to-face classes. In fact, almost no class, face-to-face or online, has a set mode of interaction that could apply or could be effective with every student in that class. While David was indeed a conscientious worker, his individualism in the class went beyond being shy or asocial. A first-timer in an online class and an accomplished business professional, David chose to actively participate in the class, but did so not by way of frequent messaging on multiple discussion forums, but by maintaining invisible yet very active presence in the space that was comfortably presented to him by this class.

*Going Beyond Blackboard: Email Messaging as Participation*

Along with postings and “silent participation,” several students showed high levels of activity by interacting with instructor privately, either via email or chat or in person during the office hours or by appointment. In particular, during the entire course of the class, I received the following numbers of unsolicited emails from the students:
1. Seth – 7
2. Ashley – 26
3. Kim – 27
4. David – 3
5. Carl – 23
6. Felipe – 10
7. Sam – 7

While private interactions are hardly ever considered “participation” in the framework of an online class, these happened to be an essential factor shaping the dynamics of ENG 207. The students’ increased reliance on private communication via email resonated with Blair and Hoy’s (2006) observation that “traditional interpersonal email communication between instructor and student and among peers [could be] among the most powerful tools in teaching and learning” (p. 33). Seth, who admitted to communicating with some of the other ENG 207 students via email claimed that: “The individual e-mails took the participants to another level with further identity beyond the group as a whole.” He concluded: “Private interactions make it a more personal relationship and allow participants to feel more of an integral part of the community” (February 4, 2007).

For Seth, the private interactions, which, in the format of an online class constitute a larger part of communication than in a face-to-face or a hybrid class, presented an opportunity for self-analysis. The very fact that Seth mentioned the word “identity” in his response points to his desire to understand his communication patterns rather than to follow the set routes for such communication. The students’ reliance on private communication in this regard appears to be a
way of becoming active meaning makers who “comprehend and analyze the various multimedia sources and, in the context of … own life, make rational decisions” (Withrow, 2004, p. 32).

While Seth’s practice of private communication with the instructor and the fellow students helped him better understand his role as an active discourse creator, Ashley, who, according to her responses, privately communicated only with the instructor stressed that such correspondence helped her “establish some sort of private space,” which enhanced her own understanding of being an active participant in this class. Analyzing her own reasons to participate privately or make choices, she asserted:

An on-line discussion is very ‘in your face.’ You cannot help see it if you're a participant ... no daydreaming while listening to class discussion as in face to face. (January 29, 2007)

A mother of two and a full time employee at a local business, Ashley’s daily schedule was busy and hectic. Feeling intimidated by the directness of the open discussion forum and her lack of expertise in some aspects of writing, she chose to rely on private interaction with the instructor in order to establish a persona that she then projected onto the screen of public group interactions in her first ever online class: a persona of a knowledgeable and caring peer, eager to share her knowledge with whoever is interested. It was on several occasions, however, that Ashley’s knowledgeable tone grew out of prior consultation with the instructor in which she discussed the choices and strategies for participation in the class discussions.

Emphasizing the safety and convenience of the “comfort zone” (Jensen, 2002; Studdert, 2005) or “safe place” (Burbules, 2002) which her private interaction with the instructor helped establish, Ashley stressed another advantage of such safe environment – creative urge that it instilled in her. She explained:
A private communication could ‘tap into’ some creativity within people that would never
be expressed or seen in other ways. (January 29, 2007)

Decisively, Ashley’s gain of confidence afforded by the private interactions led to an increase in
the initiative she demonstrated in public forums; this helped her position herself as an active
member of the online community.

Conflicts “Behind the Scenes”

Another type of activity the private interactions seemed to encourage was the conflict
situations that arise in the course of the class. Although the general atmosphere of the
discussion board interchanges remained very friendly and constructive, the intense schedule of
the class led to a few “behind the scene” arguments between students and the instructor. For
example, Kim, who, according to her own confession in one of the class forums, happened to be
the eldest student in the class, appeared to be extra sensitive toward any criticism from me as the
instructor. As a result, by the end of the first peer review, she had given way to emotions, first on
the discussion board and, later, via a string of email messages.

The most memorable argument of the class broke out when Kim set her own trajectory
for the peer review of one of the major written assignments of the class – the Critical
Autobiography. The substantive side of her reviews hardly included any critical evaluation of the
document the class had discussed. Having called the peer review instructions “Sergey’s rules,”
and having been gently corrected by me, owing to the fact that the rules had actually been
brainstormed by the entire class, Kim resorted to publicly showing her indignation:

I thought that it was you, our fearless leader, who came up with the rules!

So sorry!

Wrong again!
I'm going to go now and hide!

Best, Red Face (my new Indian name).

The obviously sarcastic tone of Kim’s message brought the class discussion to a halt as no other student considered it appropriate to either oppose Kim or continue discussion with no regard to the incident. Feeling the tension, I rushed to rectify the situation:

Dear Kim,

I absolutely didn't intend to shut you down. I hope you are not offended. Honestly: Sorry, sorry, sorry... Your general comments are very valuable -- they give the writers the praise they obviously deserve. I just wanted to push everybody toward a peer analysis and critique that would help the authors with revisions (what everybody posted is a first draft, after all, isn’t it?) and make the bios even stronger.

Have a good day and sorry again.

SR

My emphasis on apology and explanation of the benefits, which a more structured peer review could have brought to all students in this class helped turn the argument into a less haughty conversation. Strikingly, the student chose to continue this conversation off the discussion board by way of a private email message:

Sergey,

You must keep in mind that I come from a newspaper environment!

When the writing is good, it is good! The deadline is staring you in the face … the seconds are rolling by, the presses are waiting and BLAM! The piece is good! It's a go! This class is more of a "surgery" way of looking at our writing. Pull back this layer, examine that layer, what caused this, what does that mean. It's a whole different kettle of
fish! I just have to learn how to do the surgery! It takes time. We have to be careful! No slam bam! I understand your meaning and there is no deadline. We have ample days to review the writings! Thanks for being so thoughtful.

--Kim

Kim’s second and subsequent emails are marked by her readiness to discuss the reasons behind her inflammatory comments and actions. Her intention to do so away from the peers’ eyes, in my opinion, is an important component that permeated Kim’s identity construction. Projecting an image of a rebel in public forums yet softening the intensity of such image through private interactions testifies to the fact that Kim’s participation in the class took on a form of a performance (Conquergood, 2002; Loxley, 2007) rather than a natural projection of her own individuality. As Loxley (2007) contends, such performance could “bear on the bodily, practical, and processual nature of human existence … [and could be] a way of living that we have somehow repressed or forgotten” (2007, p. 153). Indeed, it seemed to me that much of what preceded her “mini rebellion” against the controlling mechanism in this class was related to the lack of expertise in this type of communication and, subsequently, reflected her fear of the unknown as well as her fear to lose face in a public forum. Kim later apologized for the harshness of some of her public outcries. She did so, however, in a private email, thus maintaining her public persona of an experienced and opinionated learner whose opinion and expertise were there to be considered and respected.

A beginner student trying to establish and uphold her ethos in a class filled with younger peers and taught by a younger instructor, Kim was noticed expressing frustration or disagreement with the class policies or showing dissatisfaction with the instructor’s handling of the requirements on at least two more occasions. In both cases, having failed to submit the drafts on
time, she “rallied” against the rigorous guidelines in this class and alerted repeatedly to the tight schedule of her life. Interestingly, however, a public outcry was followed by a reconciliation that she and I achieved communicating privately, via email. The public image of Kim’s remained unshattered: she, at least in her own eyes, continuously acted as an authoritative figure in this class and a resource for the other students.

Overall, along with establishing her own persona, Kim’s involvement in private communication allowed her to gain more confidence in her communication with the rest of the class and, even more importantly, focus on learning rather than defending her points against the “invasive” comments from the instructor and the seeming “hostility” of the class environment. According to her own confession, later, at the time of the interview, these “extended conversations” (with me, the instructor, as well as with at least two more members of the class) made her “feel better” about her time in this class.

Subsequently, the increased level of Kim’s self-confidence and comfort in this class, has contributed to the improvement of communal experience for the other members of this class. Both Ashley and Seth, for example, have mentioned difficulty focusing on the subject matter of the discussions while a member of the class (presumably Kim) showed signs of frustration or irritation. Kim’s private communication with the instructor and, possibly, with some of her fellow students contributed to a construction of a more supportive shared space and an environment in which needs, interests, and possibilities intersected in meaningful ways.

The Instructor’s Push

Another example of how private interactions affected the class dynamics was the continuous exchange between the instructor and each student on the expectations and assessment of performance in ENG 207. The weekly record of logging in, the level of student participation
in all online discussions, the quality of the reading responses, and the quality of the peer review comments were among major factors that influenced the final grade. I provided individual feedback on the students’ attendance and participation after week 6, 11, and at the end of the course. While I did not assign a grade or a score (e.g., between 0 and 7), I did point out the strengths and the weaknesses the awareness of which aimed to guide the students through the rest of the semester.

For me as an instructor, the comments on the students’ participation and involvement were an opportunity to steer the class in the right direction and to ensure learning and progress. For some students, however, such comments were a chance to talk to the instructor directly. For Carl, for example, such direct contact signified a range of communication and interaction possibilities in an online class – possibilities which he did not seem to be aware of prior to ENG 207 (these possibilities included open communication with the instructor, expression of disagreement with the peers and the instructor, ability to critique the work of others). Not only did he become more active in the open discussion forums following feedback receipt, he also grew confident in his communication with me, the instructor, who he initially considered an out of reach authority and an enforcer of rules and requirements. To illustrate the change in Carl’s attitude, I offer several excerpts from our communication with him over several weeks:

Here is a feedback message that I sent to Carl at the end of week 6:

Carl,

The level of your involvement with ENG 207 has been growing consistently over the past three weeks. I am very pleased with this fact. The quality of your posts has also been impressive. Way to go! However, there is still no activity from you in the discussion forums that deal with the book readings, so I was wondering if you have received the
book by now. As the class syllabus indicates, ENG 207 is heavily based in the handbook, so I do expect you to catch up on those readings sometime soon and work with the future readings. In case you don't want (or can't) buy the book I could loan you mine to make copies of the chapters we need. Let me know if you want to do that. I'll provide feedback on your bio tomorrow. Keep up the good work.

--Sergey

The receipt of this message prompted Carl to not only purchase the required text but also to change his communication pattern with me. I had never received private emails from Carl prior to the first trimester feedback. Following that time, Carl became one of my most active interlocutors having sent 23 emails covering issues from class performance to issues at work and general fatigue that had become a factor closer to the end of the term.

Remarkably, my individual attention toward his activity seemed to have created a communication bridge and a reason to communicate, of which the student was not aware. Immediately after the first trimester feedback, I started to observe changes in Carl’s participation dynamics. He replied to my message with an impersonal “Thanks for all the feedback. Carl.”

Here is the second trimester feedback and Carl’s response to it:

Hi Carl,

It's time for the second trimester feedback, so here is a little summary of your performance. I see that you've tried to post at least once a week and oftentimes more than that. You have also managed to really contribute to some of the class discussions. I especially liked your input on the resume forums (weeks 8 and 9). I think you’ve helped a lot of your peers with advice, personal examples, and/or analysis. The less impressive weeks among the 5 weeks of the second trimester are weeks 7 and 10-11 in which you
weren’t as active as you could have been. Some of your posts have also been of more
general character with one or two points in them at the most. I encourage you to make
more use of the peer review directions and/or book readings and try to really ‘cut’ into
the documents, analyzing their specific qualities and providing substantial advice. I could
point to Ashley’s posts here as samples in terms of length, consistency, and substance.
Overall, I would say that your participation so far earns you about 75-80% of the
participation points available (we have 20 of those points). You have been great with
deadlines, yet you still haven’t completed revision of your resume. Do it ASAP as it’s
really time for all of us to move on. Take this feedback into account for the
remaining 5 weeks of class. Stay in touch with me, too.

Best,

--Sergey

As usual, I tried to present Carl with a summary of his performance, emphasizing strengths,
mapping areas where more effort was desired, and gently pushing toward timely application of
such effort as a condition of success in that class.

Carl’s response to that message offers a lengthy and sincere analysis of his own
performance during that time:

Sergey,

I resent the second resume and got feedback from you. It wasn't clear to me that I needed
to send a third version. I'm sorry if I overlooked that! I know I haven't been a model
student this semester, but the demands that are on me right now are quite overwhelming,
and I have to prioritize sometimes and school is the one that usually gets neglected. I
have had to work 75 hours last week and this week I will be higher than that because we
have a convention show in Atlanta that we are preparing a huge exhibit for and unfortunately I have no choice but to work until it is done. Secondly, I have a business that I create logos for, and recently I have had to make 4 new logos. So ... there is little time for anything, even my family which I haven't seen but once in 2 weeks. Please accept my apologies and is there any way I could turn in my 2nd draft of my credit proposal Saturday? I will be working until 2 am tonight but I will be completely done with this exhibit at that time and the weekend will be a little more freed up for schoolwork. Thanks for the feedback and I'm sorry I have not met your expectations. I used to be a really good student. I am at lunch now and will check my email again sometime today.

Sincerely,

Carl

The apparent hardship Carl talks about in his message became a ground for a continuous email exchange in which I, as an instructor, tried to both encourage the student and yet to also provide the much needed direction for him. Similarly, Carl, an adult student combining studies with a full time job and two teenage children used the private email “space” to break beyond the impersonality of an online classroom, gain a clearer idea of his capabilities, and develop a vision of the ways to succeed in the class. It is worth mentioning that Carl’s activity in the third trimester increased considerably (i.e., the last 5 weeks of the class he averaged 3.6 posts compared to 1.2 posts in the first trimester). Private email, Carl’s alternate way of participating in the educational endeavor of ENG 207, may not have let him score higher on the number of points assigned for participation (i.e., 20 points out of 100 total points), but it did serve the
purpose of community construction, ultimately leading him to success in this class. Carl earned a hard fought B, which early in the semester appeared to be a barely accomplishable task.

The changed participation dynamics clearly altered the mood and the tone of Carl’s posts. Here is one of the messages I sent to Carl in week 14:

Hi Carl,

I was wondering how your Proposal is coming at this point.

Could you email me your revision by the end of this week/early next week at the latest? We all really need to move on.

Also, do post a revised version to your group's discussion forum.

Thanks much.

--Sergey

Carl responds with the following:

Sergey,

Wow! I thought I already turned that back in???

Maybe not, I could be slightly losing my mind. LOL

I will get that too you and the class certainly before Monday.

Thanks for the reminder!

Carl

The more informal tone and the increased frequency of Carl’s messages invoke the change of power distribution in the student-instructor communication. Harbored in the private space or, as Burbules (2002) suggests, in the “socially and subjectively [and semantically] meaningful … place [italics added]” (p. 78) of the online class (i.e., private email messages), such
communication features an interaction between two online course members rather than an institutionalized information exchange between a student and an instructor. On the one hand, such interaction breaks into the hierarchy of teacher-student communication and creates ample possibilities for a true exploration of online communication for both the student and the instructor. On the other hand, it inevitably changes the knowledge of the functions, social distributions, and interpretations of such possibilities and results in new subjective qualities for the participants of online interactions and new power structures that shape and re-shape the discourse of learning online.

The striking imbalance and complexity in the amounts of public and private online presence as indicated by the variety of the data on weekly postings and weekly visits of the class website calls into question some of the traditional assessment practices in online education that solely or largely emphasize “presence” with discussion board activities serving as the primary proof of participation. As the discussed examples demonstrate, becoming an effective communicator may and does happen in numerous ways and is subject to individual preferences, knowledges, and interpretations of the participants of the communicative act. The discussed examples of the students’ increased reliance on private interactions stress a need of looking further into the very idea of “being active” in an online class. This knowledge, I argue, is vital in the construction of a new “effective electronic literacy” (Boyd et al., 2004, p. 82), which helps examine the strategies and practices students and teachers bring to class and utilizes the new strategies and practices generated as a result of educational interactions and experiments.

Calling attention to further study of private communication in online communities, I do not intend to either propagate its universal goodness or even position this phenomenon as universally occurring. Even within a single online class, whose dynamics are scrutinized in this
project, there seems to be no standard pattern by which the online interactions of the seven students could be classified. Nonetheless, the localized and individual nature of students’ understandings of online participation and their performance of communicating in an online class (as opposed to adherence to the well-defined norms of it) make the exploration of online communication an even more urgent, vast, and exciting endeavor. In this regard, labeling only student postings as signifiers of participation appears limiting of the ways of communication and interaction enabled by the discourse of the online class.

In closing the discussion of participation, I wish to share some responses to the three interviews I was able to conduct with the students in ENG 207 provide further insights into the students’ understandings and performances of participation in online interactions. Following are three definitive quotes:

I feel an active participant spends a fair amount of time, not only posting, but also READING and evaluating other student's posts. I also feel that a TRUE active participant reads and evaluates the required readings and posts information/thoughts/analysis on them also. (Ashley, January 29, 2007)

Ashley’s remark clearly resonates with the emphasized need to explore and utilize alternate ways of participation in online classes.

In its turn, Seth’s response points to the selectivity with which some students treat participation. The absence of posts from him stood for his choice not to be visible to the rest of the class, rather than his neglect or inability to interact.

I think I was active all the way. However, sometimes I felt I needed to hold back a little. … I had trouble getting to know some of our participants because of the lack of time they spent online. There were also some who got too wordy at times and that made it difficult
to be a part of their conversation at times. I tried to keep it short, add a little humor and not be all "buddy buddy" for a fear that I couldn't be honest. I became more silent when certain students either became too "friendly" with each other or were too direct and a little rude. It was hard, at times, to measure the tone or honesty of some conversations. Some seemed like back patting sessions while others (one, for sure) were on the edge of nasty. (Seth, February 4, 2007)

Seth’s maneuvering through the class activities hints at the non-transparency of “participation” as a category for measuring student activity in an online class. The weighing and holding back that Seth points to are integral components of a communicative act such as academic discussion. A teacher’s disregard of the many aspects of such communicative act (i.e., analyzing the participants’ understanding of the dynamics of a particular interaction) inevitably leads to oversimplifying the idea of collaborating online and imposes limitations for the range of expectations from it.

Finally, a response from Kim invokes the issue of efficiency of participation that, logically, is at odds with any numerical representation of it:

I don’t think [participation in an online class] is a matter of ‘often.’ In my mind, that is a childish measure of participation. If someone can ‘get’ the material by signing on only once a week, then, once a week. If the assignments require twice a week responses, then twice a week.

Signing on a measured number of times per week eliminates the flexibility of online classes! Like me, for instance. A mother of four children still in the house plus working full time at a very demanding job AND taking a full load nights. As long as I
could learn the material, I don't think it matters how many times I signed on.

(Kim, February 9, 2007)

Kim points to the celebrated quality of online communication in general – its temporal and spatial flexibility. While participation (as assessed by the number of posts or any other signifiers of “presence”) is a desirable attribute of any online discussion, it is the acquisition of the skills and the production of knowledge, not the presence per se, that remains to be the goal of an educational endeavor of an online class.

The underlying principle here is a move away from quantifying “participation” or “presence” and focusing, instead, on the construction of a loosely controlled, self sustaining environment, whose driving force is a need to develop a base of knowledge allowing the user to effectively complete a series of tasks. This “need,” which, I will touch upon later in the chapter is the greatest antithesis to “requirement.” The invocation of a need to participate is, of course, a primary goal for the teacher and a guarantee for the functioning of a class as a community.

What’s Involvement, Anyway?

In response to RQ 1.2 – How did the students interact with each other and the instructor? – I assessed the number of posts made by each of the participants and analyzed how involved each student was with the discussions in this class. To determine the latter, I examined each student’s presence on the discussion forums (the discussion threads which I as an instructor initiated) and the discussion threads (the multi-node discussion webs initiated by the students within the discussion forums).

Over the 16 weeks of the course, I started a total of 26 forums, on which 370 threads and 721 posts were recorded. A “discussion forum” typically was a structured conversation dedicated to one topic or discussion theme. Figure 1 provides an example of a discussion forum.
A discussion forum usually included several “threads,” which were the responses to the question or the theme of the forum. Figure 2 is an example of a discussion thread.

While I designed three assignments (i.e., peer reviews of critical autobiography, resume, etc) as small group work, and created one forum for a voluntary exchange of personal images, I expected and/or required student presence on a total of 22 forums. On the three group work forums, I observed numerous instances of visitation between the students in the different groups. That is, as some students waited for their group members to post their drafts or as some of them completed reviews inside their groups, they would review, ask questions about, or merely spill
Figure 2. Discussion Thread.

praise and encouragement over the work of “their other classmates” (Kim). The chart below summarizes the students’ involvement in the class discussions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of posts (out of 721)</th>
<th>Forums with activity (out of 26)</th>
<th>Treads with activity (out of 370 total)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>94 --25.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>85--22.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>91--24.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Forums and Threads.

As the chart demonstrates, the instructor’s presence in ENG 207 happened to be the most significant of the eight course participants. My 265 posts, stretching over all 26 discussion forums, accounted for 36.7% of all class posts. Many of those posts were responses to other participants’ thoughts, questions, and ideas, while some, ordinarily, contained directions, instructions, and announcements.

The large number of the instructor’s posts was caused by two factors:

1. My own understanding of the role of the instructor as a navigator of the class activities.
2. The students’ expectation of personal input from the instructor throughout the course, which they voiced at the start of the class.

Of the 370 discussion threads, 171 (or 46.2%) had instructor’s posts. While I tried to respond to each of the students’ major posts, I also felt a need to hold back and let the students talk to each other and appropriate some of the class space. This “holding back” was not always possible as
students would oftentimes expect teacher’s feedback on prior posts before continuing with the discussion. As a result, my communication with the students was locked in a paradox: the more I tried to involve the students by way of steering them toward an all-class discussion with my frequent posts, the more I dominated the contents of any given discussion. In fact, I happened to be the most active participants on all discussion forums, leaving the rest of the class no doubt of my constant involvement in the class.

On the contrary, the students’ posts were more selective while their discussions more localized and short-lived. Following is an example of a thread where students were left “unattended”:

Attached is my revised proposal. Hopefully it comes through… Any comments, suggestions? Thanks! (Seth)

Carl was the first to review Seth’s document:

It's funny you say that you wish you had the ability to do what I do because I say the same things to other people. Trust me, you don't want to be an artist. We don't get paid very well!!! I worked 75 hours last week and only get got paid for my 40. Thanks for the compliment, though!

I suppose I need to discuss your proposal. You are an excellent writer and lay out each objective as if you were writing a manual. Perfect.

I was also concerned about the comment that ‘all humans take part in some form of small group communication.’ I'm not sure that all humans do, but maybe that's nit picky. I gotta tell ya, it’s hard to find anything wrong here.
One last thing, do you feel individuals won't spend "extra" time brainstorming for the company without some sort of fringe benefit for them? We have that problem at my work. Great job! (Carl).

Several days later, David joined the mini-discussion:

Just wanted to start off by saying that this seems like a very polished first draft! It seems to me like the document is very well tailored for the type of person that would be presumably reviewing this portfolio. It does a nice job of getting in-depth into each of the objectives.

I thought that the connection between your experiences and the course objectives was very clear, with the exception of Objective #1. In that first objective, you start off with a paragraph that directly talks about your experience, but then the rest of the section talks about small group communication in companies in general. When I first read through the paper, that initially jumped out at me as a way of "padding" what is admittedly a pretty vague objective, but after reading through the rest of the paper, I realized on the other hand that you do lay some good groundwork for the sections that follow. So now I'm not sure if that is a problem or not - I'll be curious to see what the other reviewers have to say.

On a personal note, I appreciated the humor in the part that deals with your plans. 40s is a good time to start!! Nice Job! (David).

Carl’s and David’s responses to Seth’s call for feedback contain both substantive comments (i.e., those dealing the qualities of the document which he wanted his classmates to review) and low-key remarks (e.g., Carl’s mention of his pay, David’s reference to Seth’s age). Even though both replies have a touch of formality – they attempt to highlight the strengths of Seth’s document yet
point out some areas to work on – the absence of instructor’s guidance by which every post could secure a teacher’s comment, contributes to less formal atmosphere in this mini discussion and encourages a more involved interaction.

The randomly-formed small groups, like one Seth initiated with a very impersonal call for feedback, was a typical way of student interactions in the public discussion forums. As a rule, such small groups featured limited interaction among the students (i.e., each discussion thread elicited an average of 1.62 responses from the classmates) and were short-lived (few discussion threads had a life cycle exceeding one week).

In general, the numerical data collected in response to RQ 1.2 – *Do online discussions in composition classes involve all participants?* – allowed for three major conclusions. First, even though the forum questions, generally, elicited response from all class participants, the mass participation occurred owing to the dominating involvement in the class activities on the part of the instructor. Second, notwithstanding the instructor’s general push for all-class involvement, the actual discussion of concrete points was always localized and short-lived. None of the individual threads involved more than four class participants. Only three students (i.e., Seth, Ashley, and Kim) managed to post on more than 20% of all the discussion threads. Third, while my initial intention was to encourage all-class discussions of the studied material, I observed a tendency on the part of the students to get more involved in smaller groups or in pair discussions, basing their exchange on similarities in thinking, experiences, or preferences and relating their skills and knowledge to those of their interlocutors’. A similar tendency was observed by McDermott (2000) and Tu (2004), who both emphasized the dependence of online collaborative learning on the formation of personal relationships between/among online community members. Therefore, my effort to have the entire class “talk” at the same time was not successful. The class
discussion, as a rule revolved not around the class as a whole, but around the particular interests, opinions, as well as strengths and difficulties of those who took part in the micro-level interaction of the larger framework of online class.

Overall, the data collected in reference to RQ 1.2 have drawn a differentiating line between participation and involvement. While the students’ participation in ENG 207 ranged from very high to satisfactory in the class, the patterns for interaction among the students swayed from a typical one-epicenter discussion and tended to have a strictly localized and individual character. As a result, my speculation about whether the class involved all participants has led to a question about the meaning of involvement in online classes. It has also highlighted a need to further explore ways of structuring online classes around the patterns and methods of communication favored by the students and leading to meaningful interactions in online communities.

Exploring the Power Relations

Looking into Initiative

Opening the discussion on power relations, Research Question 2.1 aimed to explore the level of students’ initiative in the class activities. In particular, it assessed the instances of students’ experimentation with and “re-vision” of strictly traditional academic writing such as nonstandard punctuation, use of capitalization, and non-standard syntax. In addition, the project examined the extent to which ENG 207 encouraged the students to raise topics for class discussions, pose questions, and challenge each other’s points of view.

My interest in exploring students’ experimentation with what Gumpert and Cathcart (1985) called “grammars” and Altheide (1985) referred to as "formats" was triggered by Inman’s (2004) argument that grammars could be indicative of “how individuals think about and try to
make sense of new technologies they encounter” (p. 112). Inman posits that “grammars … [as] meaning-making practices associated with particular media” (p. 112) and, referring to Selfe (1989) and Haas (1989), invokes the idea of revision that results from the transformations of writing and reading by way of computers.

The idea of revision is reinforced in Bolter’s claim that each new “writing space,” always refashions earlier writing surfaces (i.e., print refashioned handwriting whereas electronic technology is refashioning print) (2001, pp. 12-13). Through this process, which Bolter calls “remediation,” “a newer medium takes the place of an older one, borrowing and reorganizing the characteristics of writing in the older medium and reforming its cultural space” (p. 23).

Elaborating on the idea of remediation, Bolter and Grusin (1999) introduce two strategies by which means every medium is remediated – “immediacy” (“a style of visual representation whose goal is to make the viewer forget the presence of the medium” (p. 272)) and “hypermediacy (“a style of visual representation whose goal is to remind the viewer of the medium” (p. 272). Bolter and Grusin explain:

Although each new medium promises to reform the predecessors by offering a more immediate or authentic experience, the promise of reform inevitably leads us to become aware of the new medium as medium. Thus immediacy leads to hypermediacy. (p. 19)

This “double logic of remediation” (Bolter and Grusin’s term) leads the authors to conclude that “in our heterogeneous culture, no one technology is likely to eliminate the others” and that different technologies “appear … [and] remediate each other in various ways and in various ratios to produce different devices and practices” (p. 225).

Inman’s revision and Bolter and Grusin’s remediation made me approach students’ experimentation with grammars in light of existing conventions of producing written
documentation in an academic class. Although not always strictly academic in content, the online discussions (i.e., speaking in an academic environment) were a remediated practice of writing whereby the expectations and standards of putting words on paper with an awareness or an expectation of a teacher’s judgment inevitably bore their mark on the use of grammar. With that in mind, I looked for ways in which these conventions were revisited or deviated from. That is, I paid attention to the uses of grammar, syntax, and vocabulary that could be deemed informal or nonacademic in academic writing (e.g., use of nonstandard punctuation, use of informal vocabulary). While the list of such ways, presented further, is by no means complete, it does, I believe, reveal several practices of deviation from the grammatical or syntactic norms woven into the conventions of written communication.

While anticipating a certain level of students’ experimentation with writing in an online class, I brought up the topics of formality, initiative, and experimentation in one of the introductory get-to-know discussions as the start of the course. Surprisingly, the predominant position of the students was this: excessive informality of communication at this level (i.e., a university class in which students earn formal grades) would impede the learning process rather than make it less stressful. In fact, the initial atmosphere among the students in the initial week was that of anxiety and apprehension. Here is a thought from Seth:

Maybe I'm putting too much thought into what goes on in an on-line course, but I am more nervous about this class then I was about the ‘traditional’ class I took in the summer. Perhaps it is the fear of the unfamiliar. As I read the course documents, it seemed that quite a bit of it, so far, is common sense and common courtesy.

No? (Seth).

Similarly, Ashley’s post stresses her anxiety about the class:
I am definitely more apprehensive about this on-line class than I have been about the classes that meet face-to-face. I have to say, though, that I do feel better after reading Sergey’s notes and knowing that Stan also ‘follows along’ (Ashley).

The “fear of the unfamiliar,” as Seth put it, or the non-discursive need to hypermediate communication, as Bolter and Grusin could argue, materialized in an unusually high degree of virtual conservatism that marked the students’ writing in ENG 207.

The most common ways of experimentation with online writing were:

1. Occasional use of emoticons. A total of 62 uses were recorded in ENG 207, of which 40 were used by the instructor.

   My initial impression of the first paragraph under Objective 5 was that Adrian really knew what he was doing but so what? At the end I caught the part about how you learned the importance of listening. A very good point to make, but you might want to change the emphasis a little so it plays up your listening skills more, or at least earlier in the paragraph :) (Seth).

2. Occasional use of excessive exclamation/question marks. 12 instances were observed.

   Thanks again, Felipe, and **GOOD LUCK** [italics original] on your proposal!!! (Ashley).

3. Occasional use of excessive capitalization. 77 instances were recorded.

   Although, I KNOW you would HAVE TO BE dragging yourself to class after working full-time (you’re my HERO! 12 credit hours, full-time job, and 4 children is AMAZING!), I’m not sure this presentation would be the place to word it quite that way (Ashley).

4. Unjustified use of ellipses. 107 instances of use.
I enjoyed your comments and will give them consideration ... and possibly even re-evaluate my opinions. I did post my “first impression” of both samples, though, because I think “first takes” are important ... although, I’ve certainly changed my mind many times after hearing other views and re-reading the documents… (Kim).

5. Occasional use of excessive emphasis (combination of one or more of the following: capitalizing, underlining, italicizing, bolding of parts of text)

I like the direction you’re taking with your introduction. It DOES make me want to read more!! There are just a few minor things you might want to take a look at, though (David).

6. Occasional use of informal or inflammatory language.

44! You braggart! Happy Birthday Sweet Lady!

or

Rah! Rah! Go! (Kim).

Without a doubt, none of the six practices are conventionally appropriate in the written documents produced in academic writing (e.g., essays or response papers) in which electronic discussion takes it origin. Each of them, however, is an example of remediated writing in an electronic environment limited by the capabilities of modern technology (i.e., the word processing software and the user’s skill to use it) and driven by the online communicator’s desire to imitate emotions, gestures, or paralanguage.

Overall, however, neither of the above mentioned alternative ways of writing has either dominated the writing practice of any single student or formed a pattern for a group. The only person whose level of informality and experimentation with writing conventions may have exceeded that of the others was Kim, who, as I mentioned before, was the oldest student in this
group. In several instances her posts included more informal addresses: Ashley, dear; Sergey, the
teacher of the year; Sweet lady; my lad; woman. Nevertheless, as she did not get the same level
of informality in return, she typically resumed communicating on a more formal or academic
level. Two of the interviewed study participants (e.g., Seth and Ashley) later confessed that they
neither expected nor enjoyed what Seth called “the easygoing tone” of some of Kim’s messages.
Both mentioned holding back: Seth preferred silence while Ashley chose to reply in short
messages, such as “Thank you” or “Great idea.” Neither Seth nor Ashley considered the class an
appropriate space for friendship or comradery and emphasized that the purpose of the every
activity was to address the class objectives, “not to build a relationship that lasts a lifetime.”

The participation pattern of another student, David, was informed by similar philosophy
of communication. David’s consistently low involvement with the class discussions did not make
his postings less anticipated and welcomed by the peers. Similarly, the difference between his
participation level and that of some of the more active class participants did not correspond to a
lower quality of his work. Always on topic and on point, David’s question and responses
projected a radically different idea of communal involvement. Such involvement appeared to be
based on a self-calculated, individually tailored trajectory toward meeting the goals of the
educational enterprise – completing a series of assignments in ENG 207. The pattern and
trajectories of other students, however, invasive, did not, in case of David, sway his course and,
on the contrary (i.e., in Seth’s and Ashley’s cases) contributed to the display of contrasting
communication patterns on their part. The performance of contrast resulted in the formation of
subjective qualities in the participants. That is, acting “contrary to the way of the other,” they
realized their difference from the others and chose to act differently than the others, relying on
their situated knowledges and triggering the agency inherent in their subjectivities.
A counter tendency to experimentation was adherence to the formal and conservative conventions of written discourse. That is, despite some instances of less formal and even less conventional posts, the students mostly chose to resort to more formal or more polite ways of written correspondence. Two of the noticeable ways were:

1. Use of quotation marks to tone down the informality of particular word choice or structure.

   I think the resume has a very clean look. It is very traditional in one sense, but has a “hip” contemporary feel to it (Carl).

   Many of us are only PT students with more than FT jobs. I'd like to complete this assignment in a “straight forward,” succinct manner while providing the evidence necessary to gain course credit. I understand how to “communicate” in small groups, large groups, etc. Hopefully, I can convey my thoughts as well as you and some of the others (Seth).

2. Use of full forms of the verb to be.

   I think “regardless of the outcome” has kind of a negative sound to it, like you are not sure you are going to make it. I also am not sure what “out on the field” means. (Ashley)

   You are a brilliant writer … The font is clear and easy to read and you have covered all your bases nicely. (Ashley)

The after class interviews offered more insight into the reasons behind this conservatism. For example, Kim’s background as a newspaper copy editor bore its mark on the level of formality she considered appropriate for any academic class.
I think good presentation always helps. Clear fonts - I like sans serif. Limited colors, images, and caps… Making sure the writing is easy to follow is all important. (Kim, February 9, 2007)

Seth division of oral and written communication coupled with his belief in the inflexibility of writing conventions as well as his perception of writing as a product rather than process mark his comment:

Live discussions are more informal. On-line responses were more like a piece of work I would turn-in for an assignment. I write differently than I speak, so why wouldn't I do the same on-line? (Seth, February 4, 2007)

Finally, the constant awareness of the location of class communication within academic – and thus formal discourse – defined Ashley’s choices and performances:

I do care about grammar, mechanics, and word choice online. That’s probably one of the reasons why I’d hesitate to respond sometimes. Because I didn’t want to look or sound stupid by not having the right grammar, the right mechanics. For me personally, because it was an English class… I mean I would have probably responded more in a different class. But this class IS about the grammar, and the spelling, and the mechanics, and that’s why I responded only to what I was required to respond. (Ashley, January 29, 2007)

Thus, the domination of formal cues in the online writing of ENG 207 students coupled with a considerably low experimentation rate allow for a speculation about the student perception of selves in the discourse of an academic community online. The conservative patterns of interaction among the students as well as between the students and the instructor bring about the metaphor of imitation which saturates the students’ understanding and informs their performance
of academic community online. The issue of imitation of academic discourse was first discussed by Bartholomae (1985) in the now canonical “Inventing the University.” He argued:

When students are writing for a teacher, writing becomes more problematic than it is for the students who are describing baseball to a Martian. The students, in effect, have to assume privilege without having any. And since students assume privilege by locating themselves within the discourse of a particular community – within a set of specifically acceptable gestures and commonplaces – learning, at least as it is defined in the liberal arts curriculum, becomes more a matter of imitation or parody than a matter of invention and discovery. (p. 10)

Faced with choices in the level of formality and experimentation, which are enabled by the online discourse, the students, with almost no exception, felt pressured by the formal conventions of communicating in an academic environment. The need to adhere to the norms of communicating within an academic discourse led to the imitation of academic discourse.

*Examining Questions and Expressions of Disagreement*

To explore Research Questions 2.2 and 2.3, dealing with the formation and circulation of power in the class, the study examined the instances of disagreement and criticism and explored patterns of asking questions in the open forums of the class. The following markers were used to categorize messages as containing disagreement or questions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disagreement</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Direct disagreement (e.g., Posts containing open negation (e.g., “I have different take on it,” “I would disagree”))</td>
<td>1. Direct question (e.g., Interrogatory posts containing open- or closed-ended questions “Do you,” “What is,” “Has it,” etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Suggestive disagreement (e.g., “You might</td>
<td>2. Inferred or contextual question (e.g., “I'll</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
want to mention it more clearly” or “You may be able to get rid of the list”)
3. Contextual disagreement (e.g., “In my understanding, one page will suffice.”)
be curious to see what the other reviewers have to say,” “I would appreciate any feedback.”

Table 3. Markers for Disagreement and Questions.

Importantly, the instances of direct disagreement were extremely rare as the students strived to adhere to the standards of academic argument and professional behavior. Kim and Ashley were notably more direct in expressing disagreement, with 7 posts containing this type for Kim and 4 posts for Ashley. On the contrary, the vast majority of questions in the public forms were of the direct type. However, it was not without difficulty, and likely not without some inaccuracy on my part as primary investigator, that I could code some of the students’ posts as “contextual questions” or “contextual disagreements.” My decisions were oftentimes based on the larger context of any given conversation and took into account the responses that the analyzed posts elicited from the other students as well as from me. I have to admit, therefore, that some inferred questions or disagreements that did not generate additional discussions or elicit clear reactions from the course participants may not have been reflected in the data sample. The following chart summarizes the numerical data on expressions of disagreement and asking questions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of posts</th>
<th>Number of threads initiated</th>
<th>Posts containing disagreement/critique (Number and %)</th>
<th>Posts containing questions (Number and %)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>13 – 10</td>
<td>32 – 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Posts</td>
<td>Comments</td>
<td>Agreement</td>
<td>Disagreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>33 – 33</td>
<td>28 – 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>45 – 46</td>
<td>9 – 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>7 – 19</td>
<td>6 – 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>2 – 6</td>
<td>4 – 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felipe</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2 – 7</td>
<td>9 – 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>4 – 16</td>
<td>11 – 44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sergey</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>70 – 26</td>
<td>78 – 29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4. Expression of Disagreement and Question Asking.*

The figures presented here do not, seemingly, allow for any major generalizations or conclusions on the issue of student initiative in online classes. Indeed, the very limited sample would make such generalizations unsubstantiated regardless of the figures. However, when the interview responses are analyzed, two established trends emerge. One of such trends is the high ratio of disagreement expressed in the posts of female students. As seen in the chart, the number of such posts for Kim and Ashley significantly exceeds those of their peers. That is, almost half of all posts for Kim contain either disagreement or critique of the work of others. Ashley’s tendency to disagree is less dominant of her communication with the peers, yet nonetheless distinct. At least a third of all of her posts contain some degree of disagreement or critiquing. According to Kim, her participation strategy was almost solely based on expressing disagreement with others. She posited:
Most of the times I’d post to disagree with people, I noticed. I saw a lot of differences and disagreed with what they were saying. They gave me something to talk about. And I hope I gave them a different way to look at what they were writing about. And I appreciated that in my own writing … when people would disagree and give me a different way to look at the topic. (February 9, 2007)

Kim continued by generalizing about online communication:

I think the discussion board makes you feel anonymous and I think it’s good for a lot of people. I would not have disagreed with as many people as I did had it been in a live setting. In many cases a real world group as apposed to an online group finds it difficult to exchange their real opinions. (February 9, 2007)

The student with most professional experience in writing, Kim, a journalist, noted that her age and status entitled her to frequent expression of judgment or criticism:

I felt totally comfortable expressing disagreement online. Sometimes you know you are right and they see it, too. I'm giving my all every single time I communicate. So, when you are totally up front like that, criticism is well taken. (February 9, 2007)

Unlike Kim’s, Ashley’s use of disagreement and critique seemed to be a way for her to encourage further conversation and get an in-depth understanding of the ideas of others. She rarely perceived it as “true disagreement” or “argument” and “tend[ed] to treat it like a wonderful way to stay interested in the subject matter of the online conversation.”

While disagreement as a participation strategy marked the communication dynamics of the two female participants, each of the two, in private interviews, displayed a heightened sensitivity toward disagreement or criticism received from others. Kim’s way of saying she did not like any criticism, especially from the peers, seemed the harshest:
I am uncomfortable. I get hurt. I try to think it through and make an adjustment, but I'm not happy about it. (February 9, 2007)

Her disregard of peer criticism is also evident in the following comment:

No one likes to be criticized. If [the criticism] comes from a student, I JUST read it ... It doesn’t change my life. They might disagree because they just have to make a post. It’s not a big deal to me. (February 9, 2007)

Ashley’s dislike of criticism coming form peers appeared less blatant. She did, however, emphasize the difficulty with which she dealt with it:

I don't feel uncomfortable, but I always want to know WHY and I want more explanation than just “that doesn't sound right.” Criticism from peers was hard … much, much harder than from the instructor because I tried to be so aware of people’s situations and writing skills ... and I really tried to give them helpful thoughts without insulting them, so the few times that my work was criticized, I was somewhat “put out.” (January, 29, 2007)

The two women, therefore, display a striking imbalance in the online communication strategies: while each of them heavily relies on disagreement as a way of participating in an online class, neither one of them expects or welcomes the same way of communication from the other participants. This variety of roles assumed by the participants, male and female, is crucial to an understanding of the practices and performances of community in an online class. The vision of community as a microcosm of subjective knowledges, practices, and positionings should lead to new understandings regarding the role of subject and the power in the formation and functioning of the discourse of online community. A disregard of the subjective knowledges and practices, which, as I argued in earlier chapters, saturates most pedagogies of collaborative learning, is a practice of ignoring the multiplicity of the discourse of online community, privileging some
forms of this discourse and those (oftentimes teachers) who are members of particular discourse communities, and silencing those (oftentimes students) who are not members of the dominant discursive community.

In brief, an analysis of the students’ reaction to and beliefs about disagreement or criticism brands disagreement as a communication strategy and sheds light on the plethora of roles online participants assume by interacting online. A further study of the effect of gender and other psychographic categories on the shaping of communication in an online community is, undoubtedly, a direction for continued exploration of living, working, and studying online.

Another trend that became visible during the analysis of the data for Research Question 2 was the variance of the students’ perception of own authority to ask and answer questions online. Since the numerical scores for “Posts containing questions” did not suggest a clear pattern, I also examined interrogatory patterns in private emails. A review of the interview responses from select students drove me to conclude that asking a question in an online class served multiple purposes – from establishing online presence and engaging in the immediate conversation online to gradual appropriation of online space and establishment of own credibility or personae.

Naturally, the posts of each of the seven ENG 207 students have contained questions. While the direction of the questions varied by the assignment and occasion (i.e., question aimed at fellow students, question aimed at instructor and fellow students was not always easily identifiable), it appeared that most questions were asked at the peer-to-peer level. That is, following the initial questions to the instructor about the nature of the assignment, the students, typically, engaged in a peer-to-peer interaction, sharing ideas, almost exclusively, with the fellow students (as opposed to the instructor) and asking questions (at least publicly) primarily of each other.
Similar to the discussion of criticism, an interesting tendency concerning asking questions in public forums online was observed with the two female students in ENG 207. Kim and Ashley differed from each other in the number of questions asked in public forums (i.e., Ashley’s posed a question to the class or a concrete individual 28 times whereas only 9 of Kim’s posts contained a question. However, both female participants had a significant lead over the rest of the group in the number of questions asked privately, via email. At least 21 private messages from Kim and Ashley contained their inquiries about various aspects of the class. The table below allows visualizing the difference in the private question asking between the two female participants and the other students in ENG 207.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of Questions – public forums</th>
<th>Number of Questions – email</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felipe</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 5. Question Asking: Public vs. Private.*
A significant peculiarity of Kim’s and Ashley’s questions was the apparent thematic differentiation between what the two women could ask in public forums and what they preferred to ask behind the scenes, in private emails. In public discussions the two prevalent themes were opinion elicitation and personal detail exchange whereas in private emails to the instructor policy questions and seeking of help prevailed. For example, multiple emails from Kim contained questions about technology (from file attachment and file downloading to putting together PowerPoint presentations and making online purchases). Kim chose not to emphasize her difficulties with technology in open forums and preferred to uphold the image that she herself described during the interview:

That lady [Kim] seems to know what is going on. Hah-hah if only they knew! (February 9, 2007)

It seemed that the public space of the ENG 207 community served as “spotlight” for Kim and she tried to perform in this spotlight in accordance to needs of her online persona.

Ashley, who unlike Kim asked a lot of questions in public forums, posed almost equally as many questions in private. Like in Kim’s case, Ashley’s “behind the scene queries” significantly differed from public ones in content – the most common line of questions dealt with eliciting instructor’s feedback on drafts of assignments before posting the work for public reviews. That is, while embracing public communal interactions, Ashley chose to insure that what was presented before the eyes of her peers would necessarily project a certain level of expertise that she thought was required and expected of her as a student.

Ashley’s responses during the interview further explained her choices of communicating in public and private:
I was comfortable asking questions on-line for the most part. There were, however,
instances when I e-mailed the instructor separately to ask specific questions or questions
that “maybe” we should already know the answers to. The questions I asked in public
forums were mainly to invite others to join the discussion. (January 29, 2007)
The division of public and private is evident in this comment. Ashley seems to decisively
exclude the instructor from the “visible” community of the class and to seek another degree of
closeness with me in a space inaccessible to others.

An analysis of the students’ initiative in ENG 207 gives an insight into the choices,
actions, and beliefs that guide online participants through identity formation and instill agency in
the pliable subjectivities of the online learners. The data on the students’ experimentation with
academic rules and conventions (or lack thereof) as well as the analyses of question asking and
expression of disagreement discussed earlier, map the ways in which each individual student
may influence and define the interaction within the discourse of online community. These ways,
I argue, constitute the embodied structure of communication in such discourse as they showcase
the situated knowledges of the subjects and allow for construction of discourse-specific meaning.

Performing Interaction Online

The metaphors of agency and situated knowledges of the participants of online interaction
brought this project to the analysis of power relations in online classes. As certain patterns of
interaction were revealed (i.e., public vs. private; participation through question-asking or
disagreement, etc), it became vital to know how these patterns or oftentimes stand-alone practices
deferred the power relations in an online class and how they affected the formation and
functioning of community. To proceed with the idea of agency and subjectivity, Research
Question 3 sought to examine the negotiation of authority in ENG 207 and to examine the variety
of roles assumed by the participants in online interactions. The data and the interview responses collected in reference to Research Question 3 prompted me to conclude that the roles assumed by the class participants as well as the roles expected of the fellow class participants reflected the individual literacy practices of the members of the class. As “literacy practices never occur dissociated from the broader social practices … [and] they are never context-neutral and value-free” (Braga & Burrsardo, 2004, p. 45), the roles, expected and performed in class, depended upon the skills of the participants and were affected by the format of any given interaction (e.g., small group discussion, dialogue based on personal knowledge and professional expertise, conversation with peers vs. instructor). The malleability of “role” stood in direct correspondence with the pliability of community that evolved in the duration of ENG 207.

**Monologic vs. Dialogic Posts**

First, a significant number of the students’ posts were dialogic in nature, i.e., they were directed at a particular individual or a group of people and either contained a reaction to a previous post by a group member or elicited opinion, a piece of advice, or a mere encouragement from the online community members. An example of a dialogic post by a student could be this:

> Thanks!!! Sometimes I am hypercritical of my writing and I fear it will become dull and over-edited if I'm not careful. Sometimes I think it would be interesting to be a technical writer, but I'm sure I'd add something I shouldn't just to see if the audience is paying attention. Not a great idea when it comes to job security, you know. (Seth)

Clearly, the student is building on the ideas of a previous post developing thereby an online conversation.

The principle difference between a dialogic and a monologic post is that the latter does not encourage further conversation and only responds to the very generic theme of the discussion
forum set by the instructor. Here is an example of a message posted on the discussion forum
dedicated to revision strategies of a major assignment:

Here’s me thinking…

Introduction
- explanation of the purpose of the document and how it will detail the experience
and knowledge acquired to justify course credit.

Course Objectives
- Listing of each objective followed by:
  - A statement of the understanding of the course objective with general
    information relating to the objective
  - A personal story or actual example showing the understanding of the course
    objective
  - Inclusion of information from the course text and how it relates to the course
    objective and example provided
  - A strong conclusion to the discussion of the course objective including revisiting
    the actual objective within the final paragraph

Conclusion
- A summary of the above information and request for course credit. (Carl)

Carl’s post looks reads like a report. Naturally, it does not generate any further discussion. While
the student does “score” his participation points, his involvement in the discussion as an
interaction of an entire class remains minimal. Another example of monologic posting could be a
very common message like “Here’s my draft” or “Attached is my revision,” which are both very
uninviting of further conversation or debate. The chart below gives a summary of monologic vs. dialogic posts in ENG 207.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Number of posts</th>
<th>Monologic posts</th>
<th>Dialogic posts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>135</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ashley</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kim</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carl</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Felipe</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 6. Monologic vs. Dialogic Posts.*

As the chart indicates, a mix of dialogic and monologic posts was observed for each student. The totals for both types of posts do not suggest a significant prevalence of either – 221 monologic vs. 235 dialogic.

It appears that the high number of monologic posts is at odds with the ideas of involvement, support, responsiveness, or shared spirit of collegiality and brotherhood that saturates theory and practice of education in virtual classrooms. More importantly, the
phenomenon of online monologue contradicts some of the students’ own statements. For example:

I think that we have to keep in mind that there could be more than 2 or 3 people involved in the on-line discussion, which means that we need to keep everyone involved as much as possible.

I believe that my role will be to participate, read what others write, try to comprehend and consider what others write and then respond if applicable. (Ashley)

About half of Ashley’s posts (just like those of her classmates) did not necessarily aim at involving people in the conversation. A statement from another student seems equally cliché:

My role will be to be aware of other student’s postings and work and be willing to share feedback and information with the group. In order to gain the most from this course, it will be necessary for me to feel comfortable with “putting myself out there” and be willing to accept constructive criticism. (Seth)

Thus, while expecting and emphasizing interaction, both students, oftentimes, opted out of it, favoring the one-directional way of communicating their thoughts and ideas to the members of the ENG 207 community.

Knowledge Making in an Online Class

Another discrepancy in the assumed and the performed roles in a virtual classroom was the low level of students’ reliance on each other in knowledge making. This was especially noticeable during the peer reviews, which students had to complete in small groups for each major assignment in the class. Even though the level of engagement was typically high and the students favored an opportunity to comment on the work of each other, at least three students
(i.e., Ashley, Seth, and Kim) noted that it was the private feedback that came from the instructor that mattered the most.

The instructor also remained a paramount participation incentive for most (if not all) of the students as well as an authority in the construction of “truth” in online forums. Here are some instances:

   Whenever in doubt, I tend to ask my instructor. I mean I tried to ask peers, too, but if it’s an important question, I feel like asking the teacher. (Kim, February 9, 2007)

Kim’s comment invokes the issue of trust and dependability that seemed to have weak representation in her online community. Ashley seconded Kim on the idea of credibility of knowledge produced in student-to-student interactions:

   The instructor was much more credible to me than my fellow peers, after all, he is the instructor!! I did, however, value many of the other students' comments, ideas, and suggestions. (January 29, 2007)

Finally, Seth chose to ask his instructor and not the fellow students because he perceived meaning-making in a communal interaction more labor-and time-consuming:

   I tried to interact with everybody. I mean I will interact with whomever on-line. As far as asking questions, asking the class instead of shooting an email to the instructor seemed like more work to me. (February 4, 2007)

The idea of talking to the instructor as “less work” also prompts the following line of thinking: according to Seth, the instructor serves as a higher authority that can handily provide an answer to any question. In fact, I the ever-present and available instructor who, as the course statistics demonstrate, remained the most active participant in the class at all times definitely contributed to Seth’s limited understanding of the power arrangement in ENG 207.
Along with the earlier discussed patterns of question asking and private communication, these responses shed light on a striking trend – while the students were aware that the instructor was, above all, a participant in the class and “was lurking out there somewhere” (Kim), few if any students felt entitled to consider the instructor as a fellow community member, even though that was exactly the image I repeatedly tried to project in the class discussions and comments. My unintended domination of the public forum discussions, caused by my desire to fit in the role of “a good teacher” attending to the needs of all students, solidified the status quo in the class. In public forums, therefore, the role the class members assumed most of the time was that of a student who is being examined and scrutinized not only by the teacher (every interviewee named the instructor as the primary examiner of all class content) but also by the fellow students (Seth and Kim implied that in their comments). The Foucauldian Panopticon worked its simple magic here. However, while the Panoptic eye controlled the online presence, the same Panoptic effect instilled an awareness of being observed in the students. This awareness, which I labeled as part of the subjugation, led to the formation of an intricate public vs. private paradigm that informed all communication in this class, gave rise to a specific level of agency that guided the class participants through their choices in communal interactions.

The manifestation of this agency took various forms and shapes with some people asking more questions online (i.e., Kim), communicating with the instructor behind the scenes (all students, but especially Kim, Ashley, and Carl), minimizing participation while maintaining ample “invisible presence” online (e.g., David), or avoiding dialogic interaction (e.g., Seth, Ashley). The plethora of ways of interaction and participation triggered by the subjugation of the ENG 207 members bore its unique mark on the formation of communal relations within the space of the online class. Like the evolving subjectivities of its members, the online community
continued to evolve, connecting and empowering its members, yet also separating, limiting, and controlling them.

**Online Community Construction**

To address community construction (Research Question 4), the study explored the students’ understanding of “online community” and analyzed the patterns of community construction that revealed themselves in the work of the students. The multiple ways in which the students performed interaction in ENG 207 and the conflicting roles which they assumed for themselves and for others prompted me to approach the construction and functioning of online community with additional scrutiny. The interview questions that dealt with community formation and a further analysis of class interactions suggested two consistent themes concerning the construction and functioning of an online community: a) Online community is a by-product of an assignment-driven interaction located in time and fueled by a need to communicate rather than an opportunity to interact with others; and b) Online community is individually embodied by each of its members and is affected by their skill and need level.

*Online Community: Born through a Need*

Hoping to ignite a conversation about community, I asked the interviewees about the kinds of activities that were encouraged in an online class. While working through the responses, many of which emphasized the usual benefits of online learning (i.e., time convenience, higher level of anonymity or impersonality, and ease of accessibility of class content), I noticed none of them emphasized building relationships, friendships, or establishing particular closeness within the group – the assumed qualities of a community. Countering these missing qualities were such characteristics as increased selectivity of participation, increased labor application, and increased solitude. The sample responses read:
An online class encourages writing and weighing what you are going to write before actually posting it. It does not necessarily encourage building relationships, but maybe that is because I'm so far away. (Seth, February 4, 2007)

The writing and weighing of the content prior to posting it resonates with the earlier discussion of formality of online communication and the students’ tendency to imitate academic discourse. The public display of posts coupled with the ever-present awareness of the class as a graded performance does not necessarily encourage or enables communality. Added the difference in the student level, age, interests, such communality appears an even less relevant concept.

Online class has forced me to think more. I worked a lot harder in this class. When you are out here on your own staring at a textbook and it doesn't make sense, you must engage your brain in a new way. (Kim, February 9, 2007)

Kim’s desire to succeed in the class led to the application of additional effort to her studies, not relying on or requesting the help from her peers.

You are in a class full of people, but basically, you are always alone, all by yourself, faced with a need to say the right things to the right people, at the right time. You can't see people's reactions, facial expressions, so you have to be more aware of what your words are saying or APPEARING to say to someone reading them. (Ashley, January 29, 2007)

Ashley’s feeling separated from the class was also at odds with the traditional assumption of the dynamics in an online community.

While some of the students’ experiences directly contradicted common beliefs about egalitarity and inclusivity of online education, all three interviewees were enthusiastic in their admittance that community was a part of the class. Speaking of a connecting or communal
element of the class, the three students gave similar responses, which stressed working to address “a common need” (i.e., developing an individual portfolio) (Seth), having “similar needs and abilities” (Ashley), and cultivating “a sense of obligation that may be developed by working as a group” (Kim).

The recurrence of the “need” theme in the responses of the students suggests that the core of the community was not in particular ways or patterns of interaction, but in developing a need to communicate. In other words, the community based itself not in how to communicate but why to communicate with others toward meeting a set objective. This finding is surprising as it contradicts prior research on knowledge-making communities (Hoadley & Pea, 2002) which emphasized interactivity over method or even content of online communication as vital for the learning in online communities. The emphasis on developing or realizing a need or a cluster of needs – as opposed to the mere addressing of it/them by way of communal interaction – instilled further subjugation in the students: as they defined such needs for themselves (i.e., eliciting feedback or opinion, developing a vision or a plan for the completion of an assignment or class, etc.), they had to select or construct a means of addressing it. The means, as the earlier parts of this chapter indicated, included but were not limited to an active interrogatory mode (public or private), practicing “invisible presence” online, or reliance on or avoidance of dialogue.

An online community structure that revolves around the agency of its members, rather than the tools that enable interaction, marks, in Holt’s (2004) words, a move from passivity toward activity of the community member as a social actor (p. 53). Such social actor, Holt explains:

Is not only assumed to be more personally complex than is usual in monologic views, but is also viewed as capable of more diverse and broadly ranging activity. These expansions
of potentiality, moreover, are situated in a reality allowing for a myriad viewpoints that privilege subjectivity. (2004, p. 54)

Speaking in Foucauldian terms, the “self” of the social actor, located within the deep regimes of discourse and practice, breaks out of the web of classification, objectivation, and normalization instilled by the rigorous practice of communal interaction in the very general and traditional sense of the word. Online community, therefore, warrants a release of new agency, paves way to the subjects’ detachment of selves from the regimes of conventional truth, and allows for reconsideration and reconstruction of the very practices of everyday life, i.e., teaching and learning in an online environment.

A major implication of the need vs. format-based core of communal interaction for the distance education is this: Those who do teaching and learning as well as those who promote such form of education need to become cognizant of the communication practices available and fostered in computer-mediated classrooms. Any change in the structure of doing education implies modifying not only the methods of content delivery but also the forms and the processes of understanding that content as well as ways of engaging the content and interacting with other people. An inflexible model of “communal” interaction, driven by a participation requirement and grounded in the belief that any closed-access entity is conducive to effective knowledge-making bears a danger of ignoring the great liberating and empowering potential online technology extends to us, students, educators, administrators, or, simply, communicators.

Community Embodied, Community Imagined

The performances of online communication discussed in this chapter also suggest that the online community in ENG 207 was largely an individually embodied experience for those involved in this educational endeavor. The idea of embodiment as a rhetorical tool is attributed to

Embodied cognition research, according to Rambusch and Ziemke (2005):

> Provides additional picture of the situated nature of situated-learning activity by putting emphasis on the close and mutual relationship between thinking and doing from a different point of view. Instead of reducing the body to an input-output device and explaining cognition in terms of mental symbol manipulation, researchers and scientists in embodied cognition now seek to emphasize the complex interplay between body and mind, between the agent and the world which it is part of and functions in. (p. 1803)

Embodied cognition is also a vibrant topic in cognitive psychology. As Cowart (2006) claims:

> The general theory contends that cognitive processes develop when a tightly coupled system emerges from real-time, goal-directed interactions between organisms and their environment; the nature of these interactions influences the formation and further specifies the nature of the developing cognitive capacities.

Pertaining to ENG 207, the embodied character of the online community is seen in the multiplicity of individual interpretations of the practice of community (i.e., knowledges situated in individual history and experience) that informed the daily and weekly activities in the class. For example, a significant tendency in the weekly participation dynamics of the students was the apparent correlation between the level of participation and the personal matters that filled the “real” lives of the students. The level of Kim’s involvement, for instance, was heavily affected by two factors: problems at work (her employer, a major newspaper in Northwest Ohio had just locked out a significant number of its employees) and family issues (she was raising four
daughters, working full-time, and taking three classes as a part-time student at BGSU). The level of participation of Seth and David depended heavily on the specifics of their professional schedules (both had several business trips in the course of the class). The highest participation reading for Seth (weeks 6, 9) was 7 posts, while the lowest (week 10) was 1. Finally, Felipe’s participation dynamics reflected his struggle with English as a foreign language and the necessity to travel to his mother’s funeral in the midst of the semester. All these personal circumstances along with the existing skills, knowledges, and preferences pertaining to small group interaction, and learning in an environment where students and teacher corresponded to words, sentences, and messages were embodied in the frequency, content, and quality of communication.

Further, with six out of seven students in ENG 207 taking their first online class, participation was virtually a skill to develop. For example, Ashley stated: “I didn’t know what to expect as far as participating in classes [online],” yet she stressed, it “was less complicated than I thought” (January 29, 2007). A very conscientious students, Kim had a routine of an ideal student for any class:

I believe I took part in most discussions. Especially if those had questions that needed addressed. Even if I didn't feel that I could adequately help [to answer], I tried to at least respond to their question by posting a kind of “Hey, I was wondering about that too” message. I truly did try to acknowledge other people’s posts.

Kim’s pattern of interaction, however, was neither conventional for the communication in this group nor universally accepted. I dare presume that the large number of what Seth called “unsubstantial posts” from Kim and other participants – i.e., posts that did not contain ideas pertinent to the discussion theme – led to a disintegration of some students in particular conversations (i.e., Seth’s own postings may have become more monologic as a result of that) or
caused them to seek and practice alternate ways of participation in this class (i.e., private email exchange or “silent participation”).

Subsequently, what Kim deemed “communal,” corresponded to her individual body of knowledge on collaboration and communal interaction. Her frequent posts helped her embody or embody such knowledge. The physical and the imagined intersected here: being physically “present,” “active,” and “helpful,” she all but contributed to the construction of what Anderson (1991) would call an imagined community, “limited and sovereign” (p. 7) in its individuality and exclusivity. How she positioned what she did or tried to do in the class was not always indicative of how the other students understood her actions. A heterogeneous and multi-vocal, an image of community lived “in the minds of each participant” (p. 6). Represented in the physicality of online posts, online community resided not in an online class, but rather existed as an evasive, socially-enforced concept whose materialization was inseparable from the personal literacy histories of its members.

Speaking of the imagined communality of a nation and implying a similar nature for any community, Anderson (1991) notes that community is “always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (p. 7). Such concept, Anderson argues, while not representative of the actual connection between the common citizens of the nation, “makes it possible for so many millions of people … to die for such limited imaginings” (p. 7). Even though the idea of community remains relatively stable, yet idealized and therefore evasive, the actual embodiments, as the findings in this study indicate, vary based on the individual illiteracies of the members. Moreover, the fact that community is embodied with the help of online technology, stresses the extent to which technology permeates communication. As Seliger and Engstroem (2007) suggest:
The matrix of technological materiality and our embodiment enter into … practices, some of which are guided by preferences inherent in the artifact’s design, some of which are guided by social expectations concerning its use, but all of which select, amplify, and reduce aspects of our experience as our perceptions of the world and our modes of relating to it change accordingly. (p. 576)

The technological materiality of an online class (i.e., the software, hardware, and the internet connection that make contact possible) serves as a vehicle for construction of subjectivities as allows for the projection of the subjective, situated knowledges onto a larger screen of the process typically called interaction in a community. Further research on online communities would benefit from more consideration of the primacy of embodiment and from more critical analysis of identity and agency as distributed and socially contextualized relations.

Implications

The theoretical framework of subjugation of the online user, presented in Chapter Two, drove this project to explore the students’ performances in an online community of one online composition class at Bowling Green State University. The data on the participation dynamics of the seven students in the class enhanced with the transcripts of student interviews suggested that the multiplicity of such dynamics is the manifestation of student subjectivities.

In the absence of a fully developed and empirically grounded theory of the discourse of online communities, this project led me to examine only limited aspects of student interaction in online communities. Most of those aspects became objects of study during the course of my observations of and interactions with the ENG 207 students. My desire of positioning this project as ethnographic drove me to submerge into the class interactions and get an insider’s perspective
on the practices, peculiarities, and limitations of the discourse of online community in this one class.

Positioning individual knowledges of the participants of online educational interactions as building blocks of subjugation, I have argued that the power and subject construction reside in the knowledges with which the class participants interpreted the class rules and performed communication online. Arranged around individual needs, knowledges, and abilities of its participants, the online community appeared to be an embodied practice while the meaning of communal interactions was individually constructed and negotiated through public and private communication enabled by the computer technology. An awareness of the subjugated knowledges of the course participants is a segway into more informed and responsible uses of community online. One model for such uses that the following chapter of this project introduces is the model of online community as open source which encourages the individual interpretations and performances of its members and acknowledges the members’ needs as the driving force behind community construction.

Ultimately, this project sought to encourage conversations on teaching and learning online as it called for an exploration of the forms and meanings of online interactions. The project’s exploration of online power relations, agency, and subjectivity emphasized meaning construction as a social enterprise. According to Berlin (1987), the meaning “is never ‘out there’ in the material world or the social realm, or simply ‘in here’ in a private personal world” (p. 17). The meaning emerges “only as …the material, the social, and the personal interact,” with language being “the agent of mediation” (p. 17). The intersection of the physical, the social, and the personal allows both creating and actively participating in a public forum relative to our own historical moment. While the subject is both the holder and maker of meaning, he or she is
simultaneously a part of a larger enterprise – an episteme, which is a system of knowledge making good for a particular group, a particular time, and a particular place. It is imperative, I believe, for us as teachers to locate online communal interaction in the individual space of the community members as well as in the broader fabric of education online. A students’ and teachers’ ability to be critical about the multiplicity of online community embodied by the members’ physical lives yet enabled by various technologies should pave the way to effective pedagogies for the electronic age.

The conclusions presented here are also a product of an attempted dialogue within the discourse of online community. As “any true understanding is dialogic in nature” (Voloshinov, 1973, p. 102), my analyses are aimed at preserving the multivocality of the findings. While direct dialogue with the subjects – the students in both classes and the teacher in one class – is not always possible, the dialogism becomes possible through the negotiation of meaning of online interactions, the use of various research methodologies, and fare representation of difference while focusing on mainstream.

In light of the pedagogical nature of this project, the experience and practice of dialogue helps to become aware of the meaning and implications of online collaboration and its uses. Overall, dialogue leads to a more conscious, more responsible, and more active learning and enables a type of teaching that values “equality between speaker and hearer” (Buck, 2001, p. 214) and, by challenging the traditional power relations between the teacher and student, redefines the very idea of education. This shared knowledge, as White (1985) claims, makes teaching and learning more effective. It also serves as a good foundation for Freirean praxis – “reflection and action upon the world” (Freire, 1990, p. 36) — that challenges the rules of the
dominant system of thinking and helps re-think and improve the practices of human communication.

The last chapter of this project discusses the methodological, theoretical, and pedagogical implications of the study, points to several limitations of the project, and maps ways for future exploration of community construction in online classes.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS

Summary of the Project

In this project I have argued against an essentialized and inflexible notion of online community that, owing to the high regard for collaborative learning, has dominated online education’s theory and practice over the last three decades. Tracing the roots of such essentializing to the two themes in sociology and communication – the instinctual drive toward community-building first described by German sociologist Ferdinand Tonnies and the egalitarian promise of online technology – I proposed examining online communities in light of a fundamentally different bind – a discourse that allows divorcing the notion and practice of online community from the notion and practice of any other discourse, particularly face-to-face communication, and enables assessing and appreciating online community as a dynamic concept in its own right. Overall, such approach to online community calls for an epistemology of taking into account the unique power relations among the members of limited access online groups (e.g., online classes). It also allows for a more informed idea of communicating online that resonates with the many paths of identity and literacy formation afforded by the online technology. The production and circulation of power in the discourse of an online class, I suggested, gives rise to the subjectivity of the online group member. It is in the subjective knowledges and performances, I posited, that we could locate the true meaning of communal interaction online and build a stronger and more effective foundation for teaching and learning.

The empirical part of the project explored the performances and knowledges of online communication by the members of one online composition class taught at Bowling Green State University in the Fall of 2006. The data collected by way of observation and interviewing
revealed five choices which corresponded to the ways in which the agency of the online subject played into the formation and functioning of a class community:

1. Choice of participation mode (e.g., public vs. private; visible vs. silent).
2. Choice of range and duration of online interaction (e.g., small groups vs. class as a whole; short-lived vs. ongoing).
3. Choice of formality of interaction (e.g., formal vs. informal).
4. Choice of interaction mode (e.g., question asking and expression of disagreement vs. monologic posting).
5. Choice of obligations and responsibilities (e.g., conflicting roles for self and others).

Positioning subjects’ choices as ways of subjective power production within an online community, I argue that the online community structure in ENG 207 resembled that of an open-source software; it was fueled by the online community members’ need to communicate and was individually enacted by each of its members.

The Open Source Idea

The Open Source concept borrowed from a field inadvertently related to composition studies – software development – has in its core the “vision … to keep the scientific advances created by the software development openly available for everyone to understand and improve upon” (Deek & Hugh, 2008, p. 1). The adversary to Open Source is the “binary software” (Chopra & Dexter, 2008), which is the form in which most commercial software has been distributed since the advent of computers. The binary software, Chopra and Dexter explain has been “providing users with usable programs but concealing the techniques by which these programs achieve their purposes” (p. xiv).
Revolving around the idea of license free source code, the access of which allows any user to edit, revise, improve, or otherwise *change* the software, Open Source communication emphasizes free redistribution and non discrimination against persons, actions, or ideas (Open Source, 2006) – the virtues that easily find their way into progressive education and inquiry. In addition, Open Source stresses neutrality of technology, which prevents the product to be “predicated on any individual technology or style of interface” (Open Source).

In the context of an extended discussion on online communities, Open Source, though a metaphorical concept, invokes a stand against the licensed notion of community and demands consideration of the agency and subjectivity in the establishment of a community online. Such establishment is located in the social, physical, political, and cultural environment of the online class as well as in the embodied knowledges, epistemologies, and literacies of the community members. For the subject formation, Open Source creates an anarchic space for tactical intervention in the surveillance and control society by making the principal means of control, the code, ‘visible’ to the greatest number of subjects. The subjects, though participant in its own self-subjugation, is also a participant in its own emancipation. The machinations of surveillance, the operating systems and applications of subject construction, are potentially exposed and reconstructed. (Truscello, 2003, p. 16)

Arguably, the individual, contextual, or situational knowledges of the makers of online community – i.e. the students and instructors in online classes – could be compared to the expertise of the software developers, whom Open Source enables to modify and improve the software by accessing the source code. The code itself corresponds to the “rules of the game” (i.e., Bourdieuuvian habitus) that the discourse of online community creates. In the discourse of an
educational online interaction these rules are constructed based on the embodied experiences of the users, their needs as well as the affordances of the computer technology itself. An important implication here is that by entering the discourse, the online user inevitably contributes to the power formation in it. Being a part of the power fabric of an online class, the user, willingly or inadvertently, controls meaning making in it and sets the scene for the development of discourse specific knowledges and truths.

As this study’s findings of the students’ communication choices demonstrate, the user’s control of the power formation in online discourse extends beyond the contents of the communication (e.g., amount, method, or formality of interaction), but also includes appropriation of the technology that enables online interactions (e.g., silent participation, use of private email vs. public discussion forums). Chopra and Dexter (2008) see in such appropriation an escape of the human from the “iron cage constructed by technology” (Ellul, 1967, as cited in Chopra & Dexter, p. xiii). They explain:

The twentieth century brought a new form of technology, one in which hardware and control are explicitly separated. The means of production no longer inhere solely in hardware; control is transferable, distributable, plastic, and reproducible … Control of technology may be democratized, its advantages spread more broadly than ever before. The reactionary response to this promise is an attempt to embrace and co-opt this control to advance entrenched social, economic, and political power. It is this reaction that free software resists. (Chopra & Dexter, 2008, p. xiii)

Chopra and Dexter emphasize that the escape from the iron cage of technology is possible thanks to an embrace and conscious use of technology rather than a neglect or limitation of it. Ascribing
to Haraway’s cyborgism, they talk about the benefits which the appropriation of computer-mediated communication brings to the cyborg selves:

The empowerment of cyborg citizens rests in their ability to resist the authoritarian pressure by gaining knowledge of, access to, and control over the complex technologies that embed them (Chopra & Dexter, p. 173).

Applying the argument of technological liberation to the discussion of online community, I argue that the liberation of online communication from a standardized and preconceived notion of community opens ways to empowering the online user and constructing a more inclusive and democratic environment for teaching and learning.

The Open Source idea enables a community of knowledgeable peers united through a common need and satisfying this need through an open exchange of subjugated knowledges, standpoints, and performances. Online community as open source “creates a moment in which to make the excretion of power transparent” (Chopra & Dexter, 2008, p. 173): It frees the user from belonging to a static group structure and allows transcending the boundaries set by the computer technology. In return, it invites the user into a dynamic act of the making of online communication, providing ample space for interpretation, innovation, and self-expression.

Having introduced the theoretical concept of Open Source and having highlighted its benefits for the field of online education, I have to turn to a specific example of an open source community that, at least indirectly, could set a precedent for effective teaching and learning online. Awkwardly, I have to turn to Wikipedia, a web project that routinely causes smirks on the part of educators, and is regarded as a most unscientific source of information for academic environments and purposes. Criticism aside, Wikipedia, introduced in 2001 by Jimmy Wales and Larry Sanger (Millard, 2008), is “the largest, fastest-growing and most popular general reference
work currently available on the Internet” (Woodson, 2007). What makes it relevant to the
discussion of online community creation is the fact that Wikipedia, is also “the most successful
open content community” (Forment, 2006, p. 373), inviting its many members to constantly
revise its contents and produce knowledge.

Wikipedia, just like many other open source communities on the World Wide Web,
corresponds to the two major findings of this project regarding online community: it thrives on a
shared need of its members (i.e., information need) and reflects the various expertise (e.g.,
technical, cultural, contextual, communicative) of those who willingly come onboard with this
chaotic enterprise in knowledge making.

While the content side of the Wikipedia community may not serve as an example for
academic uses of open source, its reliance on and encouragement of the active construction of
knowledge deserves attention for online education. Forment (2006) stresses that “learning is
particularly effective when the subject builds (constructs) something for others to experience” (p.
375) and emphasizes that open source communities are a fertile ground for active and deep
learning. Strikingly, the contents of communication within the paradigm of open source
community are not the center of education. Forment calls the contents “just another tool [for
community creation]” (p. 377) and worships the symbolic interaction that information exchange
and revision affords open source community members. Agreeing with Forment, I have to take his
beyond symbolism: An important part of such interaction is the physical, techno-bodily or
cyborgian identity of active production that influences the subjectivities of those involved in the
communicative act.
The Pedagogical Implications of the Project

It is the technology of communication that allows creating “a small culture of shared artifacts” (Forment, 2006, p. 375) yet it is the subjectivity of the online user that instills such artifacts with meaning. Serving a major conclusion of the entire project, this philosophical concept informs the two pedagogical implications of the study:

1. Online community must be a space sensitive of the subjectivities of the members and encouraging a variety of subjective knowledges and performances;

2. The technologies of online community must be designed to accommodate and the multiplicity of subjective knowledges and performances.

The first implication points to a need of a continued exploration and discussion of the meaning of online community and an analysis of the factors, environments, and subjectivities that play into its formation and functioning. Undoubtedly, such exploration of community requires an active involvement of teachers and students alike and reinforces the ideas of dialogue and Open Source learning that this project aims to encourage. One of the forms this dialogue may take is an exchange of narrative reflections and discussions of the ways in which technology affects communication and helps community building. I argue that this exchange should become an interdisciplinary movement rather than reside inside certain departments, programs, or classes on cyber campuses. Any extension of knowledge on online community will teach online communicators the range of interaction opportunities and boost further experimentation with and analysis of the literacy practices of online communication.

The second implication deals with a critical stance on the existing technologies and a commitment to making these technologies more reflective of the variety of communication modes in today’s technologized world. An inference here is a need of a critical analysis of
closed-access software applications like Blackboard, whose inflexible format offers limited ways for experimentation and self-expression and whose controlling grid contributes to the problem of “ignore[ing] our students’ backgrounds, experiences, and knowledges and [undermining] our best pedagogical intentions” (Elder & Toner, 2003, p. 34). A critical assessment and revision of the technologies of online communication could help construct critical pedagogies and encourage critical literacies (e.g., through multiplicity and diversity of students’ opinions and/or recognizing the worth of personal narrative) that modern education widely celebrates.

Designing education technology with an eye to accommodate and the multiplicity of subjective knowledges and performances signals an overdue attention to the communication practices of students whose literacies embody new communication contexts. As Selfe (2006) explains, it is oftentimes the students, not teachers or administrators who are often the first to experiment with new kinds of texts, to discover new literacy values and practices. They are also the first to understand the functions new media texts to fulfill in their lives. (p. 57)

The uses of technologies in ways that empower the members of an online community give the respectful attention to students’ literacies helps establish a new dynamic in the teacher-student relationship and turn any educational interaction into a more conscious, critical, and responsible endeavor. Technologies, as argued before, are the remediated spaces informed and defined by the values and histories of the cultures we live in. It is our responsibility to live with them and explore them; we may not and cannot run away from them.

Limitations

The major limitations of the project stemmed from the specifics of the class environment (i.e., an intermediate writing class) as well as the specifics of the class population (i.e., non-
traditional students, working professionals). The research sample, therefore, was hardly representative of the student population of any given college class or campus in the United States or elsewhere. While I positioned the study as not aiming to generalize about people, practices, knowledges, experiences that embody online communities, I admit that the limits of the sample led to a limited number of findings concerning student initiative, power roles, or gender roles.

Another limitation of the study was its dependence on the format and contents of ENG 207 (e.g., types of documents produced, types of experiences discussed, and types of interaction encouraged). A larger-scale study featuring a more representative sample of the general population could yield additional insights into the manifestations and influence of subjectivity on the formation and functioning of an online community.

Other limitations resulted from the physical affiliation of the class with a particular software – i.e., Blackboard – that limited the students’ expression and offered a pre-loaded set of power positions. Consequently, the findings were constrained to the affordances of this software. It is vital for future research on online communities not to limit itself to concrete applications of technology and locate itself in a wider fabric of communication that defines today’s technoculture.

Finally, a limitation of the study resulted from the fact that the Principal Investigator was also the instructor in ENG 207. My authority to create the contents of the class as well as assign grades for these contents could be at odds with the neutrality of my analyses and conclusions. A similar project in the future should aim at a more in-depth examination of the agency residing with the different members of the online community. Such project could combine observational and autoethnographic evidence from teachers of various disciplines. It could also be enhanced by
the autoethnographic accounts of students and thus offer a multi-layered reading of the practices and performances of communication and collaboration online.

Future Research

I believe that a systematic collection, sharing, and discussion of practices of critical uses of technology in online classes should produce a pool of knowledge that can enhance teaching and learning practices of all technology users. An understanding of technology as a socially, culturally, historically, and politically situated phenomenon embodied in the knowledges and performances of its users is an important departure point in the creation of critical pedagogies and literacies that will drive computer-enhanced education of today and tomorrow. This understanding of technology, I believe, maps an important direction in the exploration of human identity and pushes us toward a more conscious and more critical assessment of reality. Our knowledges of online communication showcases the ways for new research on online community, informed by its understanding as a power producing entity, an amalgam of social and individual perceptions and values, and a constellation of opportunities for constructing and preserving the identity of the 21st century online communicator.

The future of the dissertation project lies in the exploration of knowledges and performances of subjectivity in online communities and analyzing the cultural and political, and epistemic dimensions of such knowledges and performances. A possible extension of the project could be a study of the dependence of subject formation on such cultural categories as gender, ethnicity, nationality, to name just a few. Another direction the study may take is a closer look at the assessment practices of online collaboration as well as the dependence of assessment policies on the power negotiation in the online classroom.
Finally, a pedagogical extension of the project could be a further discussion of Open Source as a technology for collaborative teaching and learning online. A pedagogy informed by this technology would encourage further inquiry into the power structures of the online class and would contribute to the creation of a modernized, democratic, and critical academia.

Final Thoughts

The growing enrollment in online classes, which in the Fall semester of 2006 reached 3.5 million students (Allen & Seaman, 2006), marks the need of further exploration of online communication and collaboration with much immediacy. This dissertation is part of an evolving conversation about *online community* which, as I argued throughout the project, resides in the subjective knowledges and performances of the online learner and is fueled by the discursive power of online teaching and learning. A further discussion of subjective knowledges, performances, and the discourse of online community invites an online researcher on a journey of discovering the meaning of already existing embodied experiences and making sense of the practices of everyday life. Discussing a need for such meaning discovery and sense making for the field of rhetorical historiography, Mountford (1997) argues that, “we must look for *rhetoric* where it has not been found – in many cultural locations” (p. 2). Paraphrasing her claim, I propose re-examining the paragons of *community* inherited from the collaborative education drive of the last three decades and stress a need to pay more attention to the online learners’ situated knowledges and performances of community. Like the exploration of other historical topics in rhetorical studies, which helps us rediscover the past and re-think the present, a re-examination of the practices of collaborative education must open new ways for reshaping the meaning of this heritage and allow ascertaining our true identity. A fuller judgment of literacy as a phenomenon of human activity will allow us not only to add other cultures and practices to a
more inclusive tradition, but also to redefine what counts as evidence in evaluating literacy. In this way, we may create a more complete and honest picture of the world we live in. This picture should also help us formulate more accurate hypotheses about the functions of literacy in the era of the global technoculture and acquire a better understanding of the new literacies whose meanings are to be explored by generations to come.
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August 4, 2006

Dear English 207 Student,

My name is Sergey Rybas, and, as you know by now, I am going to be your instructor in ENG 207 “Intermediate Writing,” which you are enrolled in during Fall 2006. I am a third-year doctoral student in the Rhetoric and Writing Program at Bowling Green State University, and I am currently working on a research project that explores power relations in online composition classes. With this letter, I would like to request your permission to analyze your postings in this course; I would also like to invite you for an interview which will take place after grades get posted at the end of the Fall semester. Note that your participation in this study will not influence your class grade in any way. You are not required to participate in this project to successfully complete this course. Your consent to participate will be obtained and stored by a third party who will not disclose your identity to me until after the end of the semester. You can change your mind and withdraw from the project at any time during the class period.

The study period will be between August 28, 2006 (second week of class) and December 16, 2006. The data analysis will start after the end of the semester; thus I will only analyze the activity of those students who have indicated their consent to be part of the study. I plan to interview 5-6 students to get deeper insights into the process of formation of power relations in an online composition class.
The results of the study will help improve the quality of online instruction at BGSU and other institutions offering long distance courses. A better understanding of students’ perceptions of an online learning experience as well as students’ expectations from such experience will help teachers design more effective online courses.

**Your Benefits.** Your participation in research counts because the ultimate objective of the project is to improve the education process. By allowing observation and analysis of your online postings you will contribute to BGSU’s continuous effort to make online education a maximally meaningful and effective experience. Also, if you take part in the study, you will have a chance to express and share your opinions with a researcher interested in students’ points of view. In addition, you may get valuable insights into carrying out a research project in your professional or academic life.

**Your Participation.** As a researcher, I will be observing your public interactions in class: online discussions, postings, and announcements. If you agree to participate in this study, your public communication with me as an instructor and your classmates will be recorded and analyzed.

The information you provide will remain confidential and your identity will not be revealed unless you specifically request identification. When I quote from your postings or interview, I will not use your name and assign you a pseudonym. In other cases, I will present the data in summary form. I will save the interview and other records in digital form on CD; the CDs will be stored in a locked filing cabinet.

As a participant, you have the right to ask questions of me about the study. Your can also request a summary or copy of the results of the study when the project is complete.
I ask you to respond that you agree or do not agree to participate in observation and/or interview by **August 27, 2005**.

If you agree to be a part of the project yet choose **not to participate in an interview**, please e-mail the following message to Jennifer Almjeld, a colleague of mine who has agreed to assist me in obtaining and storing consent information. The email for Jennifer Almjeld is ________@bgnet.bgsu.edu.

This is ____________ (put your name). I am at least 18 years old. I have read the information about your study. I agree to allow observing and recording my online interactions in ENG 207. I have chosen not to be interviewed.

*If you are given this letter during the class meeting on August 23, 2006, sign the enclosed slip with the above message and give it to the person administering consent receipt (Note, Human Subject Research regulations require that I am not present in the class during this procedure).*

*Retain this letter for your records.*

If you **also agree to be interviewed**, please send the following message to ________@bgnet.bgsu.edu.

This is ____________ (put your name). I am at least 18 years old. I have read the information about your study. I agree to allow observing and recording my online interactions in ENG 207. I agree to be interviewed, too.

*If you are given this letter during the class meeting on August 23, 2006, sign the enclosed slip with the above message and give it to the person administering consent receipt (Note, Human Subject Research regulations require that I am not present in the class during this procedure).*

*Retain this letter for your records.*
By sending either of the above messages, you are indicating your consent to participate in the project.

After the grades for this class are posted at the end of the semester, I will contact those who have agreed to be interviewed to discuss the most convenient form and time for our conversation. The approximate time of conducting the interviews is late December 2006 – early January 2007; the maximum length of each interview is 45 minutes. You will be given several options for the interview: we could exchange several e-mail messages (i.e., 3-4), talk in an online chat, have a conversation over the phone, or meet face-to-face. If you prefer a phone conversation, I will call you and cover the expenses connected with long distance or local calls. I will be taking notes during the interview. In case of online chat, we will meet online and the script of the interview will be saved. I will audio-record the interviews that take place on the phone or face to face.

For more information about the project and your role in it, please contact me at my e-mail address ______@bgnet.bgsu.edu or office phone (419) XXX-XXXX. I will respond as soon as possible. You may also contact Kris Blair, the Chair of my dissertation research at (419) XXX-XXXX or ______@bgnet.bgsu.edu. As a Chair, Dr. Blair will supervise this study and will have access to all data sets. If you have questions about the conduct of this study or your rights as a research participant, you may contact the Chair of Bowling Green State University's Human Subjects Review Board at (419) 372-7716 (hsrb@bgnet.bgsu.edu).

Thank you very much. I appreciate your time and involvement.

Sincerely,

Sergey Rybas, Department of English
Interview Transcript – Student

Hello and thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. Let me start by asking you some questions about your background and general experiences with this class.

1. Did you have any experience with online classes before ENG 207?

2. Do you consider yourself proficient with computers?

3. What age group do you fall into?
   - 18-29
   - 30-40
   - 41-50
   - 50 +

4. How much time per week did you invest in this class?
   - Less than 5 hours
   - 5 to 10 hours
   - 10 to 15 hours
   - More than 15 hours

5. When (what time of the day) did you do most of your posts in this class?
1. Did the classes yield a high level of students’ activity in the discussions of the studied material?
   - In your own experience, please explain what it means to be an active participant in an online class. How often should one post messages to discussion boards to qualify as an active participant? Should the messages be of a particular length?
   - How easy/difficult is it for you to join an online conversation?
   - Did you consider yourself an active participant of online discussions in this class?
   - When were you silent? What did silence mean?
   - What were the factors that made you participate?

2. Do online discussions in composition classes involve all participants?
   - How often did you participate in online discussions?
   - How easy was it for you to participate in online discussions? Explain.
   - As you posted your ideas to the discussion board, were you “talking” to the instructor or to the entire class? Who was your audience?
   - How often did you get to respond to other students’ ideas? How often did they react to your ideas?
   - Did any of the actions of other students or the instructor encourage or discourage you to participate in online conversations?

3. Did the classes yield a high level of students’ experimentation with and “re-vision” of strictly traditional academic writing? How common were the instances of such experimentation/re-vision (e.g., use of color, lack of punctuation, lack of capitalization, etc.)?
   - Are your online responses any different from those in live discussions? If so, how?
• How easy or difficult is it to express your ideas online? What helps you express your ideas better?

• Are there any differences in terms of standard grammar, punctuation and syntax rules between live and online discussions?

• How encouraging or discouraging are online discussions of experimentation such as use of color, use of various fonts, use of images?

• What other differences between online and offline discussions can you name?

4. Do online composition classes encourage students to raise topics, pose questions, and challenge each other’s points of view?

• How comfortable is it for you to ask questions online?

• How similar or different is the process of asking a question online to that of asking it in a face-to-face class?

• If you feel like asking a question, who do you direct it to?

• Have you ever started a discussion thread on a discussion board?

• How often did you respond to the questions of other students?

• How often did you respond to questions from your instructor?

5. Did the class discussions yield any disagreement among the students as well as between the students and the instructor? How comfortable did the students and the instructor feel about disagreeing online?

• How comfortable is it for you to express disagreement online?

• Do you feel comfortable when others disagree with you?

• Is your reaction to the disagreement from a fellow student different from that from the instructor?
• It is easy to disagree with a) a fellow student b) the instructor?

6. Did the participants of online interactions assume the same roles for other participants as they did for themselves?
• Do you expect to get responses to your postings from the instructor/students?
• Do you feel obligated to respond to the postings of others?
• How do you usually react to postings that contain some disagreement with what you say?
• Do you expect other students’ responses to address your questions or merely relate to the general theme of the discussion
• As you respond, you do address the concerns of those who posted before or try to express your own concerns/ideas?

7. What actions, decisions, or beliefs, on the part of the students, may account for their own understanding of selves as subjects?
• What are some of the unique qualities of an online class?
• What kinds of activities does an online class encourage/limit? Why?
• How would you describe your teacher’s role in a typical online discussion/online class in general?
• What is your role as a student?

8. What is the users’ understanding of “online community?”
• In what ways does an online class encourage/discourage formation of a community?
• What are some of the features of an online community?
• In what ways was 207 a community? In what ways, was it not a community?
• What are the temporal and physical boundaries of an online community?
9. What features or parts of an online interaction are deemed “communal” by the students?
   - What makes an online interaction more or less communal?
   - Give an example of some of the features of the class that were “communal.”

10. What does it mean for the student to be a member of an online community?
   - Who are the members of an online community?
   - How easy is it to join an online community?
   - How many members make a community?
   - Who do you consider an active member of an online community?

11. How does the subjugation of the online user affect construction of community?
   - How is an online community maintained? What is the driving force behind it?
   - What are the roles of the instructor and the students in maintaining a community online?
   - What actions and choices, not possible or uncommon in off-line interactions, are enabled within or by way of an online community?
   - What are the affordances and limitations of an online community?

Closing Questions

1. Did the class meet your expectations?
2. What was unusual about this class?
3. If you could, what would you change about this class?
4. Are you planning on taking any online classes in the future?
5. If yes, how will the experience you had in this class help you in your next online class?