

Affinity Space Ethnography: Qualitative Research in Online Spaces

Research Questions

As qualitative researchers, we are interested in the intersection of the learning sciences and new literacies.

Our ethnographic research of online affinity spaces related to *The Hunger Games* and *Neopets* has led us to conceptualize *affinity space ethnography*. We ask:

How can we trace adolescent literacy practices in online affinity spaces?

What methodological tools can researchers use to study affinity spaces?

What tools are best suited to online learning environments?

Theoretical Questions

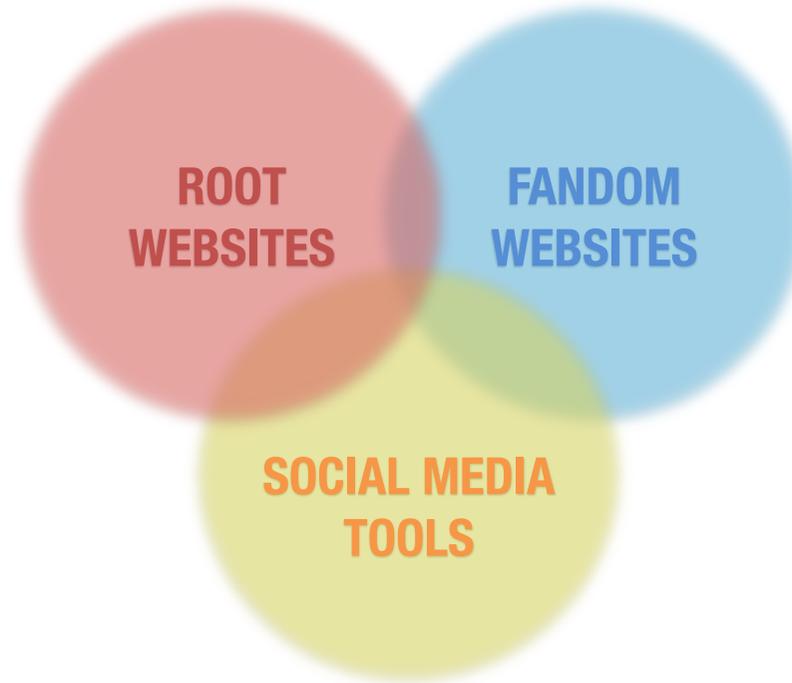
How can we account for observations conducted online in multiple media and multiple communities, rather than face-to-face?

How can we consider observations made in sites that themselves are often unstable and shifting?

What are the implications of applying a single-sited, intensive method like ethnography to a multi-sited, diverse online affinity space?

Does online research pose unique ethical challenges, given the (im)permanence of online records?

Portals into Online Affinity Spaces



Root websites are portals specific to the affinity space, such as *Mockingjay.net* within *The Hunger Games* affinity space. *Fandom websites*, like *DeviantArt.com* and *FanFiction.net*, are part of multiple affinity spaces. *Social media tools*, including *Twitter* and *Facebook*, can serve as portals.

Features of Online Affinity Spaces

- Common endeavor
- Self-directed, dynamic engagement
- Multifaceted, multimodal participation
- Audience-focused production
- Portals offer leadership roles
- Knowledge is distributed across portals within the affinity space
- Portals document content and practices
- Many spaces encompass many differently-focused portals

Data Collection

Our approach to data collection is multi-faceted and iterative. It includes:

Systematic observation provides insight into the dynamics of communication and semiotic production in various portals.

Multiple *interviews* with focal participants via *Skype*, *email*, and *instant messenger* highlight key practices, beliefs, and values within the affinity space.

Because online affinity spaces are socially constructed and digitally mediated, *artifact analysis* is instrumental. This may include codes of conduct, role-play game rules, and online discussions as well as fan-created stories, videos, songs, and artwork.

Primary Analytical Tools

Affinity Space Ethnography

Lammers, J.C., Curwood, J.S., & Magnifico, A.M. (2012). Toward an affinity space methodology: Considerations for literacy research. *English Teaching: Practice & Critique*.

Bidirectional Artifact Analysis

Magnifico, A.M. & Halverson, E.R. (2012). Bidirectional artifact analysis: A method for analyzing creative processes. *Proceedings for the International Conference of the Learning Sciences*.

Discourse Analysis

Wood, L.A. & Kroger, R.O. (2000). *Doing discourse analysis: Methods for studying action in talk and text*.